RICHARD DARE

MRS ALFRED BALDWIN

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RICHARD DARE

VOL. II.

RICHARD DARE

BY

MRS ALFRED BALDWIN

AUTHOR OF

'THE STORY OF A MARRIAGE' 'WHERE TOWN AND COUNTRY MEET' ETC.

Each man has his own vocation; his talent is his call.
There is one direction in which all space is open to him.

EMERSON

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. II.

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THE SECOND VOLUME

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RICHARD DARE

CHAPTER XV

RICHARD LED CAPTIVE

Romance, like a ghost, eludes touching; it is always where you are not, not where you are. The interview or conversation was prose at the time, but is poetry in memory.

G. W. Curtis.

Shortly after Richard's introduction to Mrs. Peveril, he received an 'At Home' card from her, as tangible proof she had not forgotten the existence of the house surgeon at Eastminster Hospital. The invitation was an immense surprise, and if he had intrigued for it for years past he could not have accepted it with greater joy and triumph. It was for a small and early party on Wednesday evening, the twenty-fifth inst., at No. 100 Berkeley

Square. He looked at the card a dozen times a day, and carried it in its scented envelope about with him in his pocket-book, as too sacred an object to be left on the mantelpiece in the coarse company of a briarwood pipe and a laundress's bill.

It was not difficult to arrange with the assistant surgeon to undertake Richard's duties on the night of the twenty-fifth, and he hoped that no case of unusual interest or importance would be brought in to delay him at the last moment. If people would kindly abstain for that one night only from attempting to commit suicide, and arriving at the hospital in a dying condition to monopolise his attention, or coming in with scalds, burns, and broken bones to detain him, they might be as mad drunk or unfortunate as they liked afterwards, and he should be entirely at their disposal.

Richard could not have defined why he was so excited in anticipation of spending a few hours in Mrs. Peveril's society. The knowledge that Margaret was a married woman

had destroyed a certain romantic vision, never wholly thrust into the background of his mind, but there remained a strong curiosity to see her in her home surrounded by her friends. 'She will never know what she has been to me,' he thought, 'and there will be no harm in refreshing myself once in a way with the sight of her beautiful face.'

Richard dressed himself with punctilious care, and spoilt half a dozen white ties before he arranged one to his entire satisfaction. When at length his efforts were crowned with success, he looked at himself in the mirror with an earnest scrutiny, that suddenly recalled Jakins's interview with the looking-glass in the double-bedded room, with all its comic tragedy, and he laughed aloud. Then, flicking his gloves at the reflection of his face with good-humoured contempt, he left his room and ran down the echoing stone steps to the great hall door, and in a few minutes was bowling along westward in a hansom.

Mrs. Peveril's large drawing-rooms were

already filled with a floating crowd of gaily dressed ladies, and the usual sprinkling of gentlemen, when Richard entered, and the unknown name of Mr. Dare was announced. From the back drawing-room came sounds of music, to which no one beyond the immediate fire of the singer's eye paid the slightest attention. A lady with a deep tenor voice was singing a lullaby to a crashing accompaniment on a grand piano, in tones to waken and terrify babes and to agitate her grown-up listeners. When her last powerful shout had died away, and conversation was no longer interrupted by music, Richard for the first time caught sight of Mrs. Peveril. She was moving about among her guests, pleasantly speaking with each, tactfully introducing listeners to talkers, pretty girls to elderly men, and clever girls to young men, and leaving everyone to whom she spoke on terms of heightened complacency with himself.

For the remainder of the evening Richard saw no one but Mrs. Peveril, and his eyes

followed her from room to room, fascinated by her radiance. There might be other beautiful women present for all that he knew, but if they were, they were quenched and eclipsed by the brilliant hostess. Mrs. Peveril's beauty was not of the kind to sink softly into the heart and grow upon one gradually. It was of a pronounced and aggressive type, and seemed to rush forward to challenge admiration. It was not heightened by simplicity of attire, nor did it harmonise with delicate neutral tints. Hers was a beauty that demanded splendour of colour and ornament, and Mrs. Peveril was artist enough to know precisely what suited her best.

She was dressed in soft, deep-red satin, against which her brilliant neck and arms shone pearly white. Her necklace, bracelets, and the fillet that bound her glittering hair, were of magnificent old Indian gold work encrusted with rich unpolished jewels.

At length Mrs. Peveril caught sight of

Richard, whose shyness and modesty had prevented him from forcing his way through the crowded rooms to pay his respects to his hostess. She reserved an especially brilliant smile for him, and was sufficiently at leisure, in the midst of a hundred guests, to speak a few words and to shake hands with him, as though he were the only person in the room. Mrs. Peveril always conveyed the impression to anyone with whom she spoke that he was the sole object of her undivided attention, a delicious insidious flattery to which no one is insensible. Least of all was Richard unmoved by it, who had been so little in society as not to know that a delicately complimentary manner is part of the equipment of a woman of fashion. In his simplicity he supposed that his hostess's looks and words expressed her mind, and he was overwhelmed by her kindly reception. The slightest knowledge of society would correct the mistake, but at the moment he was like a girl who has led so secluded a life she believes the first man who pays her

a compliment is in earnest, and that it is a very serious matter indeed.

'I have so often thought of my visit to your beautiful hospital the other day! I cannot tell you how disappointed I was when you were called away to some unpleasant duty or other, just as you were going to show me your operating theatre.'

'If you will only let me know at any time when it suits you to come again, we will try to manage better,' said Richard apologetically.

'I do not know whether Dr. Muir told you I would not let him show me anything more? I said I would wait till some time when you were at liberty. By the way, I have read your very interesting article in the "Lancet,"' and Richard went red to the roots of his hair, for he had written a number of papers on medical subjects of which he ventured to think Mrs. Peveril had best remain in ignorance.

'Your article on vaccination,' and Richard breathed freely again. 'It is surprising that anything more needs to be said on the subject,

though I suppose in the slow march of progress, for every step forward there is the tendency to slip two steps backward. But I am sure that such writing as yours would convince the most prejudiced,' and with a smile that made him feel weak as water before her she passed on and was soon deep in conversation with a conceited amateur composer. Him, too, she left happier and on better terms with himself, having confirmed his secret belief that the mantle of Wagner had fallen upon his shoulders in ample folds.

Richard looked closely at every elderly man in the room, trying to discover if any one among them suggested to his mind the idea of Colonel Peveril. But a more unsoldierlike set of men he had never seen, and it was impossible to fix on one bald-headed gentleman rather than another as the probable husband of his beautiful hostess. There was not a face in the rooms that he knew, till suddenly he caught sight of Dr. Muir, who

nodded to him from afar. When they were near enough to each other to exchange words, Richard asked:

'Is Colonel Peveril here?'

'No, he never shows up at his wife's parties. You been here long?'

'About a couple of hours.'

'Half an hour of this kind of thing's enough for me! I've just thought of a patient I should like to see, so I'm off, and can leave Mrs. Muir with a decent excuse. Good-night,' and the doctor wound his way through the crowded room towards the door.

Punctually, as though he were hastening from Cinderella's ball, fearful lest the spell should be withdrawn and his hansom cab and horse turned into a pumpkin drawn by a rat, Richard departed on the stroke of midnight. He did not speak to Mrs. Peveril again before leaving, but he treasured in his mind the few words she had spoken to him that raised him so highly in his own

esteem. If any other woman had said as much, it would not have turned his head. The marvel of it all was that Margaret Featherstone, whom he had dimly worshipped for many years as an ideal being, had met him at last, face to face as an equal, and even implied by words and manner that she looked up to him. Then the remembrance of Colonel Peveril's existence helped to steady him and to pour cold water on his excited, enthusiastic feelings. He assured himself that Margaret was now in reality further from him than she had ever been, and as though his faith in the truth of the assertion needed confirmation, he repeated it again and again.

Nothing of importance had happened in the hospital during his few hours' absence, as he ascertained by making a round of the wards before going to his own room. There the first object he saw on entering was a letter from Johanna lying on the table. It was only a week since he had last heard from her, and he wondered what she had found to

say again so soon. He opened the letter, and folding the envelope lighted his pipe with it, and flung himself into the easy chair to enjoy its contents to a soothing accompaniment of tobacco. But the letter contained news that made him put his pipe down abruptly. In a few sorrowful lines Johanna told him of the death of her Uncle John, who had died the day she wrote after a short attack of bronchitis. She did not speak of herself, but Richard knew what it meant to her, the double loss as of father and home. And he, too, had lost his best and truest friend. The world did not contain another such for him, and, deserted by John Gage, it must henceforth be a colder, narrower place. He sat down at once to write to Johanna—a letter in which he felt more fraternal than he had ever done when they had called each other brother and sister. Richard had not realised till now the deep hold his friend had on his affections, nor how certainly he had counted on seeing him again. He poured out his heart to Johanna

in a long letter of sympathy in their common grief, and the clock struck three before he signed himself, ‘ always your faithful Richard Dare.’

CHAPTER XVI

DRIFTING

Could you see every man's career in life, you would find a woman clogging him, or cheering him and goading him.

THACKERAY.

BEFORE Mrs. Peveril had satisfied her curiosity in medical matters, she paid several exhaustive visits to the Eastminster Hospital on days when she had ascertained that the house surgeon would be at liberty to give her his undivided attention. Then she had written him a charming note, on delicately perfumed paper, as though to prepare him for the incense of flattery it contained, assuring him of her gratitude for his lucid explanations of all that she had seen, and intimating that a hospital was no hospital but a desert to her, unless Mr. Dare could attend her on her progress through the wards. Frequently

after parting with Richard she would remember some little thing she had wished to say or to ask, and the next post would bring him an impulsive confidential note, that he first learned by heart and then locked up in his desk as a treasure. For Mrs. Peveril was interested and attracted by the clever young surgeon. She had petted and patronised immature authors and artists in plenty, but she had never before taken a promising young medical man by the hand. Many weak heads she had turned in her time, but few so strong as Richard Dare's, and she recognised and appreciated the fact. With infallible instinct she divined his feeling, and by no means scorned the worship of a gifted man of proud reserve, in spite of the social gulf between them. She felt amusement touched with pathos, in seeing how entirely he believed her pretty complimentary speeches, the childlike simplicity with which he took paste for diamonds and brass for gold. She did not know that great as her

beauty was, it was not the sole cause of Richard's devotion, that he had cherished her image since he was a lad, and surrounded her with a halo of romance that none but herself could dissipate.

Meetings at the hospital under guise of visiting the sick and the afflicted soon led to meetings elsewhere, without any pretence of philanthropy whatever. Occasionally Richard was made happy by receiving a note from Mrs. Peveril, intimating the afternoon and the hour when she would be undisturbed by visitors and at leisure for a long talk. It was not always possible for him to accept these invitations, but he was now so fairly carried off his feet that, short of actually killing a patient, there was nothing he would not have done to procure himself his greatest pleasure. His promotion had been rapid, and he was already among the privileged few whom Mrs. Peveril summoned to her presence at any hour she chose.

Mrs. Peveril and her guest were alone in

the drawing-room. She was leaning back in a large cushioned chair idly playing with a fan which she slowly opened and shut as she talked. She wore a soft, creamy white dress, against which the brilliance and purity of her tints showed wonderfully, and her red gold hair reflected fresh depths of colour at every movement of her head. By her side, on a velvet cushion, lay Toby, sleeping the sleep of the apoplectic.

No man could have looked unmoved on Margaret Peveril's beauty, least of all one whose life was spent in the contemplation of physical horrors in the midst of appropriately ugly surroundings.

Richard was seated opposite to her on a low chair, in an attitude of devout attention, and the conversation had evidently taken a personal tone, for Mrs. Peveril was saying, 'When Dr. Muir first introduced you to me, I had an impression that you were a man of whom something would be heard. You may think me vain, but I have a keen eye for

talent, and I recognise it wherever I meet it.'

'I could never think you vain,' replied Richard earnestly; 'but I think you may be mistaken. The only talent I am conscious of possessing is a certain tenacity of purpose and power of applying myself with all my faculties to one object.'

'Then nothing can prevent you from rising to distinction in your profession. Two paths lie before you at your age,' continued the lovely lady as though she were at least fifty: 'either you will be tempted by the prospect of wealth, and strive after a fashionable practice, or you will steadily pursue medical science for its own sake, and make a name for yourself, but not necessarily a fortune.'

'A fortune I don't care about. But if hard work will make a good livelihood, that livelihood I mean to have. I know what poverty is; I was born poor, and have always been more or less poor. I don't mind the

privations of poverty very much, a strong man need not do, but I hate the dependence of poverty, that is the worst thing about it. It cripples one's freedom at every step, and lays one open to innumerable temptations of a mean kind. You, who have always been rich, do not know what this means.'

'How can you tell that I have always been rich? For all you know to the contrary, I may have married an old man for his money,' and she clasped her closed fan in her slender fingers and looked at him.

'You could never have done that,' said Richard fervently.

'Many girls do it.'

'But you are not one of the many.'

'You are right, in that respect at least. I am not one of the many, but I do not think others believe in me as you do,' and she lifted her glorious eyes to him in their most dangerous aspect, no longer flashing with light, but veiled with tears. Then she continued in a low voice:

'I would give much to be able to recall the enthusiasm of my girlhood. There was nothing worldly in it, or sordid; but I have outlived it, and am the most prosaic soul alive. I declare I have not the capacity of romance left in me,' and Mrs. Peveril sighed, and her faithful listener sighed sympathetically with her.

'But we were talking about you,' she said in her usual voice, lightly opening her fan to its full half circle; 'we were talking about you and your future. If you leave the hospital soon to begin a practice of your own, you will be obliged to marry. People don't like unmarried doctors, and a wife is part of your professional outfit.'

'Not of mine! My patients will have to take me as the bachelor I am or consult someone else,' said Richard warmly.

'Then you don't like the idea of marrying?'

'Not in the abstract, certainly. Why

should I? It forms no part of the life I picture for myself.'

'Then I shall not lose you so soon as I feared,' said the lady with a smile that made Richard her slave afresh. 'I admit that I am somewhat *exigeante*, I like my friend unmarried; a wife is a great hindrance to friendship.'

'But you do not regard a husband in the same light, or you would not honour me with your friendship,' said Richard with the straightforward simplicity that never failed to delight Mrs. Peveril, it was so unlike what she met with in anyone else.

She laughed.

'Oh, a husband is a very different thing! If I may judge of the species by the only specimen I have ever closely observed, they are too indifferent to their wives to concern themselves about them or their friends. I confess it has always struck me as odd that a man should take greater care of his property than of his wife. I have known a husband

who would shoot a burglar on the spot to save his spoons and forks, and yet could not even see the man who was robbing him of his wife's heart, actually could not see him, any more than if he had worn the mantle of invisibility one reads of in the fairy tale,' and she leaned forward towards Richard with dilated, glowing eyes.

'Such a man must be mad, as well as blind!'

'Oh, no, a very sane gentleman, and particularly sharp-sighted and clear-headed where anything that interested him was concerned, only his wife did not interest him, that was all,' and her handsome face grew hard and cold.

'If a man will not take the trouble to guard a treasure, he cannot blame another for esteeming it at its true value,' said Richard, fully understanding that Mrs. Peveril spoke of her own experience.

She laughed a little mocking laugh.

'Treasure is not exactly the word that

expresses the disillusioned heart of a woman, who has had the beauty and sanctity and poetry of life destroyed for her before she was twenty years of age ; I should rather call it the battered remains of what was once a gift for a king. But it is time we said good-bye. Colonel Peveril will be in very soon, and I don't ask you to stay and meet him. I would introduce you with pleasure if either of you were likely to care for it, but I don't think you are,' and she rose from her chair as she spoke.

At parting she allowed Richard to retain her hand in his while they stood speaking together in undertones, and he left the house no longer his own master, but fascinated, flattered, ensnared, the slave of a beautiful, capricious woman. Her oblique mention of the tragedy of her early and mistaken marriage, and its ensuing desolation, appealed to his chivalry and compassion. In his modesty it seemed to him marvellous that she should have singled him out for such a confi-

dence. He did not know that there was not a man in Mrs. Peveril's intimate acquaintance to whom she had not told the same terrible history. It always marked a stage in those friendships that had made her the talk of her circle.

But her growing intimacy with the house surgeon was more piquant than any flirtation in her own set could have been. She had to do with a most direct and simple nature, with a man unspoiled by society or dissipation, who did not understand coquetry or playing at the semblance of passion. She was interested and touched by his sincerity, and could even pity him in anticipation of the inevitable awakening. What was pastime to Mrs. Peveril was deadly earnest to Richard Dare.

CHAPTER XVII

JOHANNA RETURNS

O the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what world's away!
BROWNING.

WHEN Mr. Gage died Johanna felt as though a screen had been blown down between her and the outer world. From her early childhood he had sheltered and protected her, and though he allowed her absolute personal freedom it had been within certain clearly defined bounds. Her uncle had always decided where they should live and how they should live, been master in his own house, and kept his niece in childish ignorance of the use and abuse of money. And now the kind guardian and protector was gone, and Johanna was alone in the world, so far as anyone having the right or the desire to guide her was

concerned. He had left her provided for on a scale that was wealth compared to anything she had formerly known as her uncle's housekeeper. For it had been his custom to pay all bills himself by cheque, so that she seldom had control of a larger sum than half a crown, and now that she had a fortune at command, she could not at first be sure whether she should make ducks and drakes with it, or turn miser on the spot.

Johanna had many friends who were anxious to keep her among them, but her uncle's death had changed everything for her, and taken away her desire to remain in Florence. She was drawn towards 'the great wen,' that in spite of every admitted drawback she preferred to live in to any other city she had ever seen. How far the desire to meet Richard Dare again may have influenced her prompt decision, she did not stop to enquire; that she wanted to see him, and that soon, was certain, for when she found to her delight that her uncle had left him a substan-

tial legacy, she dropped no hint of the kind in her letter, but copied the clause in the will concerning him, and sealed it in an envelope to deliver herself to Richard.

Johanna arrived in London a fortnight after her uncle's death, to stay at a quiet West End hotel till she could find either a small house or good rooms with a studio, where she could continue to paint as she had done in Florence. Beyond this she looked forward to nothing; all was a blank. As she sat alone in the unhomelike room, with its large mirrors and flaring gas, hoping that Richard would be able to call on her that very evening, she felt isolated and cut off from everything she cared for. Her old, happy, dependent life was at an end; the new, lonely, independent life not yet begun, and for the present she was in a suspended and intermediate state. She was convinced that Richard would come to see her directly he knew she was in London, and she started, repeatedly thinking that she heard his step in the passage. The hotel was in a

quiet neighbourhood, beloved of street musicians who came to destroy that quiet, and suddenly, from beneath the window, rose a woman's voice, clear and sad, singing, 'Home, sweet Home,' in a way to break your heart. Johanna could not bear it. It was impossible not to listen, and if she listened the tears must come. It was a deep, pathetic, contralto voice, such as one loves to listen to when one is extremely happy, and there is nothing within that answers to its rich melancholy but that simply dissolves one if it touches a sympathetic chord. Johanna fled from before it into the depths of her bedroom, where she waited wondering how soon it would be safe to return to the sitting-room, when a waiter knocked at the door. 'A gentleman wishes to see you, madam,' and he gave her Mr. Dare's card.

Her heart beat with delighted expectation as she entered the sitting-room. The melancholy singer had moved out of hearing, and Richard was standing by the table.

'Oh, Richard!'

'Johanna!' and this brief greeting was all they could utter after their long separation. An embarrassing remembrance of the frame of mind in which they had parted three years ago arose, and the shyness that thrusts itself like a wedge between those who have been apart long enough to lose touch with one another's daily lives, was almost as tangible as the presence of a third person. But by the time that Johanna had told Richard the circumstances of her uncle's illness and death, the sense of strangeness had worn off, they were at leisure to notice each other and the changes time had brought about in their appearance. Richard saw with admiration how Johanna had developed and improved. He went so far as to think the distinguished-looking, grey-eyed, dark-haired woman decidedly handsome, which was much for a sworn admirer of Mrs. Peveril to admit. Three years had changed the girl into a woman of self-reliant nature and quiet charm, and Richard had out-grown his early

awkwardness, and acquired a well-bred and self-possessed manner. Johanna felt in an undefinable way that he was gone from her, though when they were once more at their ease he was as friendly and almost as affectionate as ever.

'Well, Richard, I hope you have made many fresh friends, and gone into society as much as you could since the dear, simple days in Queen Square,' she said in kindly tones, when she felt they had spoken enough of what was sad and irremediable.

'I see as many people as I care to do. I have any number of acquaintances; but, you remember, I was always content with few friends, so long as they were to my mind. But, of course, in my profession, I am not so foolish as to shut myself up and go nowhere. You will let me come and see you sometimes in your new home, Johanna?'

'Indeed, yes! I want my new home to remind me as much as possible of my old one, and I have no friend so associated with that as you are.'

'What can you teach me now, Johanna?' said Richard smiling. 'I have not forgotten my German lessons,' and the allusion recalled to them both their astronomical observations from the drawing-room window, and Johanna at least felt conscious and uncomfortable.

'Oh, I can teach you Italian, if you like, for a change, or painting if you prefer it. I have done nothing but draw and paint for the last two years; I have worked in my studio almost as hard as you work at the hospital.'

There was so little of the artist in Richard, and so much ignorance of art, that he had to restrain himself from exclaiming, 'What in the world is the use of that!' but instead he said, 'Then you must have made great progress.'

'I hope so,' said Johanna in rather a subdued manner. 'I have made a drawing of Uncle John that I think you will recognise, and I have painted some heads of Italian children, that were like little angels come down from Heaven.'

'Do you find more beauty among the

Italians than we have here in England, where we certainly don't startle each other with our beauty every day?'

'I think among the young girls and children one does; but, oddly enough, the most beautiful woman I have seen while we were in Florence was not an Italian but an Englishwoman. What would I not give for the chance of taking her portrait, supposing I were able to do justice to her! She was staying at an hotel near our house, and I found out who she was, a Mrs. Peveril, the young wife of an elderly English officer,' and Richard started at the name.

'Ah! you know her; then am I not right in saying that she is very beautiful?'

'The most beautiful woman alive!' and Richard, conscious of his own fervid manner, hesitated a moment, and made matters worse by adding, 'That is to say, at least I think——'

'You think she is; then, of course, that makes her the most beautiful woman alive to you. Does she live in London?' and Johanna

felt excessive curiosity to know all about the beautiful Mrs. Peveril, who it seemed was an acquaintance of Richard.

'Her husband has a house in town,' was the vague reply, and as Richard volunteered nothing further, they passed to other topics.

Before they parted, Johanna placed a sealed letter in Richard's hands, and said, 'You will find when you read this that Uncle John's affectionate thought for you shows itself even after his death. I have had nothing whatever to do with it; it was entirely his own kind idea, and you will value it the more on that account. You will hear from his lawyers about it directly; don't look at it till you are at home.'

When Richard opened the envelope he found that it contained a copy of a clause in Mr. Gage's will, copied by Johanna, in which he left him a legacy of a thousand pounds, and an annuity of a hundred a year for five years. Never did help come more opportunely. Richard was exceedingly anxious to

leave the hospital, to begin a practice of his own, and this unexpected legacy would enable him to take the decisive step at once, and he blest his friend dead as he had blest him living.

After the passing uneasiness of their first meeting, Johanna and Richard resumed the old terms of their friendship before a brief glamour transfigured it, a period they had both persistently endeavoured to ignore in the many letters that had passed between them. But if Richard had not been drawn in an opposite direction by the powerful magnet of Mrs. Peveril's attraction, Johanna's charm would quickly have re-established itself. And as to Johanna, there would have been a resurrection of feelings she confidently believed were dead and buried, if her fine sense had not warned her of a change in Richard, for which in her heart of hearts she was not prepared. She knew so little of her own feelings, that she was surprised to find she had expected to continue her story at the point where it left off, or

rather, at the point where she had voluntarily closed it. She had repressed Richard when he was becoming her lover three years ago, and suppressed herself from a sense of wounded pride in having failed to regulate their friendship as she intended. But now that they met again, she recognised with angry astonishment that the attraction he exercised over her was as powerful as ever, while he had learned his lesson and thoroughly accepted the brotherly relationship she had blindly forced upon him against his will. Poor Johanna!

CHAPTER XVIII

IN A STUDIO

Work is the cure for all the maladies and miseries of man —honest work, which you intend getting done.—CARLYLE.

No sooner did Johanna's friends and acquaintance know that she was in London than she was inundated with advice of many and conflicting kinds from one and all. She was told the kind of house that she would require and the rent she ought to pay for it, the kind of person that ought to live with her as companion, and the neighbourhood in which she ought to take up her abode. She was instructed gratis in what was proper and becoming in a lady of independent fortune, what she was expected to do and also what she was not expected to do; and all this mass of information launched at her without her having asked the opinion of a single human being. She gave a

polite hearing to each separate impertinence, and took her own way. Regardless of what she was assured society expected of a lady in her position, she would have neither friend nor chaperon to live with her, nor would she burden herself with the care of a house. A studio was the chief thing she wanted, and if she could find one that she liked, and lodge in the same house, it would meet all her requirements.

Johanna told her plans to Richard when she had thought them out for herself; and he was eager to help her by any means in his power. Whenever he could find an hour to spare, he accompanied her on a lodging hunt, which ended happily in the discovery of a good studio and compact rooms in a pleasant part of Brompton. As soon as she and her servant were in possession, the first guest she entertained was Richard, for whom she made tea in her sitting-room, and, waxing confidential in her cups, confided to him her ambition to become an artist. The life attracted her

irresistibly, could she only be sure of her own powers ; for if she had no touch of genius her industry and zeal would only make the fatal want more conspicuous.

By no stretch of imagination could Richard enter into her feelings or share her enthusiasm, but he had none of Mr. Gage's horror of the modern activity of women. He looked at it from the medical point of view, and, regarding work and mental exercise as safeguards of a woman's health and sanity, congratulated Johanna heartily in having found a pursuit that congenially occupied her hand and brain. Frequently as he made time to see her for a few minutes, he could not know through what anguish, and doubt of herself and her own powers, she struggled through the next six months. But one day when he had a little more leisure, and could pay her a reasonable length of call, he was present at the last scene in her life as an artist.

Johanna was alone in her studio, standing at her easel with head critically inclined to

one side, gazing with disenchanted eyes on the picture before her, when the sound of a familiar step on the stairs brought the colour to her cheek and set her heart beating rapidly. She stretched out her hand involuntarily, as though she would cover up from sight the canvas she was regarding with so much disfavour; then, turning aside and leaving it in all its naked crudity, she said, 'Come in,' in reply to a tap at the door, and Richard entered the room.

Richard had little time to bestow upon social amenities, and the only persons he found leisure to call upon were Mrs. Peveril and Johanna Gage. He was in high spirits to-day. He had just performed a critical operation successfully at the hospital, and another awaited him in the afternoon, while a new patient had arrived with a complication of diseases that would afford him a wide field for interesting experiment for weeks to come. Added to which the evening before he had spent a whole hour in paradise, his own par-

ticular paradise, the back drawing-room in Berkeley Square, where Mrs. Peveril had devoted her music and her conversation to him with a flattery delicate as it was delicious, and the afterglow still lingered about him.

'I have half an hour to spare,' he said as he entered the studio, 'and there is nowhere that I could spend it so pleasantly as in talking with you—that is, if I do not hinder you in your work. When one has finished one's own work for the time being, one is apt to have no conscience about interrupting others,' and he glanced enquiringly from her troubled face to the picture on the easel.

'Oh no, you don't interrupt me; I was doing nothing but regret, and that is unprofitable employment,' Johanna said, smiling sadly. 'You've found me in a bad moment, Richard! I am out of heart, disgusted, unhappy, and as to work I can do nothing worthy of the name,' and she shot an indignant glance at the offending picture, which

indeed was all that she took it to be—a pronounced and unmistakable failure.

Richard followed the direction of her eyes, and stepping close to the easel, inspected the picture upon it as though it were a specimen under the microscope.

'Oh, come away! A picture is not meant to be looked at like a miniature,' said Johanna laughing. 'There, stand at a more respectful distance, a couple of yards away at least; tell me what you think of it then, and I will tell you afterwards how it strikes the artist.'

'Am I to say what I really think?' asked Richard simply.

'Why not? You cannot hurt me by what you say, because you admit that you know nothing about art or pictures; if you did I should not have the courage to challenge your opinion.'

Richard laughed. 'If you ask for my opinion I certainly sha'n't offer it upon a subject of which I am ignorant. Though I know nothing about art, I ought to know something

of anatomy ; and the first thing that strikes me in looking at this picture, is that you should know something about it too before you venture to draw the figure. You would have my opinion, Johanna, and there it is,' he said deprecatingly.

'There, that will do!' and Johanna stretched out her hand towards him as though to silence him, in spite of her brave assertion that he could not hurt her by what he said.

'You have only put into words what I knew already. Richard, that wretched failure is the sole outcome of two years' conscientious, hard work! I have dreamed dreams and seen visions, and there is the end of it all! I dreamed there was the making of an artist in me, I did indeed! I have worked heart and soul only to discover that I have little real appreciation of art, a most limited power of execution, and no creative power at all. Which means that I have mistaken my vocation, and wasted two years of my life ;'

and there was the slightest tremor in her voice as she spoke.

'Not wasted, my dear Johanna; those years are not wasted,' said Richard, full of sympathy, while speaking the truth as he would to a man. 'No work is thrown away that is conscientiously carried out to the best of our ability, though the result may not be what we expected or intended. It is so much force, and if you fail in one direction you are bound to succeed in another.'

'I know what you mean!' said Johanna, rallying herself out of her disposition to tears; 'I know what you mean! I shall be like the man who tried his hand at making a horse-shoe and failed, but was determined not to be beaten, so he dropped the misshapen bit of hot iron into a bucket of water, and said if he couldn't make a shoe, at any rate he could make a "fiz," so all was not lost;' and while they laughed at the old-world story of the self-complacent bumpkin, Johanna took up a penknife that lay among her paint-brushes.

'But even if you have failed as completely as you suppose, perhaps it is only that more work is wanted. Why not begin all over again from the beginning?' suggested the indomitable Richard, advising her as he would himself.

Johanna turned towards him as she opened the knife, and delicately felt the keen edge of the blade with her finger.

'Richard, let me ask you something! If you had worked with all your powers at your beloved surgery for two whole years, and at the end of that time found that you could not bandage a limb properly, or dress a wound, should you think there was the making of a surgeon in you? That is a parallel case.'

Richard laughed. 'But I cannot imagine failing in the thing I was born to do!'

'The thing you were born to do! Ah! that is it. You have found your vocation, while mine is yet to seek. No, painters like poets are born and not made; hard work alone never yet made an artist, though never

was an artist without hard work. I am going to treat my picture—my diploma picture of incapacity—as it deserves,' and before Richard could stay her, with a rapid movement of the hand Johanna had ripped the canvas from top to bottom with her pen-knife.

Richard started from his chair dismayed at the havoc she had wrought. 'What a cruel thing to do!'

'Cruel? It is just and right, and I feel happier already than I have done for a long time past. At least there is a visible end of self-deception and self-complacency. Now that I have destroyed my unlucky picture, I can never be tempted to look at it in a moment of wounded vanity, and imagine that I am an unappreciated genius,' and Johanna inflicted another jagged wound on the canvas.

'Don't do that! I can't bear to see you destroy the result of so much time and perseverance!' and Richard spoke as if it really hurt him.

'What? Are you using the commonplace expression, "I can't bear!" when all the while we can bear everything that is to be borne!' and her handsome eyes glowed through a mist of tears as she lifted the torn and ragged picture from the easel and set it on the floor with its face towards the wall.

'And now I'm one of the unemployed—I've got no work to do!' and she flung herself into a chair, and her hands fell limply on her lap.

'Cannot you be content with being, instead of doing, for a little while?' suggested Richard tentatively.

Johanna shook her head. 'I'm afraid not! We women are consumed nowadays with what Uncle John called a spirit of pestilent activity. We are not content, if our grandmothers were, with "the common round, the trivial task." Household cares no longer fill our hearts and satisfy our intellects, whatever they may have done formerly. No, there is no rest in my bones; something I

must do,' and her momentary listlessness of attitude and manner disappeared, and she sat as upright in the luxurious arm-chair as though it were a three-legged stool.

After a pause Richard spoke. 'Can you write, Johanna? You have insight, observation, imagination. I should think you might write, since you feel a dispensation of work is committed to you.'

'You mean turn my fidgets in a fresh direction? No doubt I can write in a strictly literal sense, because I'm advanced beyond pothooks and hangers; but I could not write a poem to save my life, nor a novel to save my soul. Oh, Richard! on what slender grounds mental power is attributed to us women! A man must show proof of work achieved before anything is conceded to his ability, but with us promise is taken for performance, and if a woman has a lively imagination and a fair share of intelligence she is credited with genius, or some other gift she does not possess. In fact, I suppose we are

praised not so much for what we do as for what we are.'

'And that would never content you!' and Richard walked to the window and looked into the gloomy little garden below as though he were thinking of something remote from the present conversation. Suddenly he turned round and said with decision, 'Johanna, you would make a splendid hospital nurse!'

Johanna laughed merrily at the idea. 'I have always said that you were a monomaniac about your profession, Richard! You are thinking of it all the time, and you want to seize me in a moment of indecision, press-gang me as it were and carry me off to hospital work whether I like it or not!'

'And what better thing could happen to you, since you are bent on work, than that, in the absence of a vocation for anything else, you should be press-ganged, as you call it, into a profession that would offer scope for every talent you possess? The career of a properly educated hospital nurse exercises

head and heart equally; compassion and skill go hand in hand; no qualities you possess would be too fine to bring to bear upon your work.'

Johanna remained silent, while her face gave no clue to her train of thought.

'Johanna, do you like sick people?'

'No, I dislike them exceedingly,' she replied with a hearty frankness that made Richard laugh.

'Why does it amuse you? I gave a truthful answer to a question asked without any qualifying clause. You don't ask me if I have ever loved a sick person, or under what circumstances I might be brought to like them collectively, but baldly "Do you like sick people?" and I reply No, I don't, and that is the truth. But why do you ask me, Richard?'

'Because no matter how clever and intelligent a woman is, she will never make the best kind of nurse unless she likes, or even loves, sick and suffering men and women.'

'Yes, I can believe that; but how does it concern me when I have no intention of cultivating the society of the sick in the capacity of a hospital nurse?' and Johanna sharpened a lead pencil while she spoke, till her lap was strewed with fragrant cedar cuttings.

Instead of replying to her remark, Richard asked her another and apparently an irrelevant question.

'Johanna, are you devout?'

She looked up thoughtfully from her pencil-sharpening.

'I? Devout? I cannot tell; I suppose I should know if I were. Why do you ask? Are you thinking it would be better if I stifled my desire for active work in a nunnery?' and she broke the point of the pencil and began to sharpen it again.

'I ask you, because if you were devout it would give you that sympathy with the sick that perhaps you have not naturally, and without which no woman has any business in

a hospital except as a patient. God forbid you should bury yourself in the name of religion, or anything else, where your bright abilities would have no scope. Your intellect should do good service in the world, and I cannot imagine a better sphere than in hospital nursing. It might become to you what surgery is to me, an absorbing pursuit, demanding the best of your nature, satisfying both head and heart. I wish you would make up your mind to be trained at our hospital, which of course I think the best in the world.'

'But even if I cared for nursing, I could not enter a sisterhood,' objected Johanna.

'The Eastminster Hospital is not nursed by a sisterhood. Our nurses belong to no religious order, and they are only called "sisters" because sister is a sweet name for sick folk to call those who are kind and gentle to them; it seems absurd to address your nurse as "Miss So-and-So."'

'Well, if ever I were a hospital nurse,

Richard, which is the height of improbability, I should prefer surgical to medical cases. I would rather nurse people with broken arms and legs, but otherwise in their usual health, than have to endure the depressed spirits and irritable tempers of invalids.'

'What an epicure among nurses you would be, picking and choosing cases you thought likely to give you the least trouble!' said Richard laughing. 'But all the same, I wish I had you to work under me! Your intellect and nerve would be invaluable to me!' and as he rose to go he added, 'Think of what I have said, Johanna. It is no new thought to me, though it surprises you, and I should never have ventured to speak of it if you had not taken me into your confidence just now. I know that it does not sound attractive, but I believe that if you could once throw yourself into it you would find it enthralling.'

'But, Richard, if I have no aptitude for nursing, and am not devout, and do not care

for sick people, could any other motive be strong enough to attract me towards what I feel to be ugly and repulsive?' and her face flushed as she spoke.

'I don't know how it may be with a woman, but I think that a man, merely to put an end to indecision of mind, would set about even repulsive work when he knew that it was useful and valuable work; but we must thresh this question out another day, Johanna. I wish I could stay and do so now, but I must go. I have a most interesting operation to perform at five o'clock, and I wish, for the patient's sake as well as for my own, that you were the nurse.'

'Stop a moment, Richard. Do you really wish me to be a hospital nurse, or are you only speaking as a doctor who wants to enlist all the able-bodied young women he can find for the service?'

'You put me through the fine sieve, Johanna. I speak both as a friend and as a doctor; but don't flatter yourself that you

would be of much use as a nurse till you had had a couple of years' training; after that you and I should work together to good effect, I think. Seeing you, as you said, among the unemployed, my egotism prompted me to suggest how you might be of service to my profession;' and Richard looked at his watch, and his mind was already in the operating theatre before his bodily presence was withdrawn from the studio.

Johanna watched the door close after him, while her expression changed rapidly with her varying thoughts, and she laughed softly to herself. 'So Richard does me the honour to tell me I should make a good hospital nurse! I think I see myself in a white linen cap, that only allows the tip of my nose to be seen in profile, and out of doors surmounted by a heart-breaking bonnet that could only be endured by one who was sure of wearing a crown hereafter;' and she looked at her handsome face in the glass over the mantelshelf, and her nimble thoughts ran on in the same

vein. 'And I should wear a black dress, with a white-bibbed apron-good-bye to all my pretty frocks! I wonder why it is thought necessary to make nurses look like ghouls! Can it be to mortify their souls? Isn't the profession of a nurse enough to do that, even if they were dressed like ballet-girls when they were on duty? Isn't the sight of wounds and broken limbs sufficiently chastening, without adding the further depression of an ugly uniform? If I were a patient I should beg and pray my nurse to wear the gayest colours, that I might have something cheerful to look at, and I'd undertake to get better all the sooner for it.'

But gradually Johanna's thoughts grew serious enough. She realised that she was five-and-twenty years of age, living alone, disappointed in the career she had chosen for herself, and not knowing to what object she could direct her consuming activity of mind and body. She was under no compulsion to work for the sake of a livelihood. Her

means were more than enough for all her wants and for most of her fancies, but the spirit denounced by her Uncle John wrought strongly in her, and she could not be content without a definite occupation. Judged by her own exacting standard, Johanna pronounced herself a cumberer of the ground, an idle being, absorbing happiness out of the pleasant world in which her lot was cast, without giving anything in return. Did Richard see her as she saw herself, that he prescribed the self-denying life of a hospital nurse as the best life for her? She had frankly told him she had no vocation for it, and he had assured her that if she were devout that would supply her with the right spirit for the work, implying that the love of God gives motive power for the performance of uncongenial tasks.

Johanna was compelled to admit that divine love did not move her to seek the company of the sick, the fractious, and the afflicted, even though it were to alleviate

their sufferings. Deep in her heart she was conscious of another love, in the strength of which she could face a life that was repulsive to her, and that never would have been her choice. Richard had suggested that she should become a hospital nurse. Clearly it was his wish for her, and if she could be of real use to him in that capacity, she felt in her ungrudging soul as if that alone would justify her existence. With a woman's blind instinct of self-sacrifice, after the first feeling of repulsion at the new idea had subsided, the more painful the career offered to her appeared, the more she was drawn to accept it. This is one of the paradoxes of a woman's nature. Richard would be the source of her strength if she embraced this repellent life, and seeing him daily she would derive power from his presence to overcome her shrinking from dreaded duties.

Again the question, 'Are you devout?' rose up in her mind, demanding answer, and

she replied to herself, with bowed head, 'No, I am not. If I go into this work it will be for love, it is true, but not for love of the sick and suffering. In time God may give me a higher motive; but I know the motive that actuates me now, and I would not work in any hospital but Richard's for the world. To see him daily, to do his bidding, to help and second him in his work—that is motive enough for me, a spring of action that will not fail!'

Resolutions effecting complete change in our mode of life are often made rapidly, or they would not be made at all, and within three months from this time Johanna had entered the Eastminster Hospital as a probationer. It happened that, during the interval between the conversation recorded in the studio and the decisive step she took in consequence of it, Johanna saw very little of Richard, and had no further opportunity of talking the matter over with him. Alone she pondered the subject in every

aspect, and by force of her own arguments brought herself to be of his way of thinking. There certainly was no reason why she should not make as good a nurse as he said she would, and she determined to fulfil his prophecy.

Johanna threw all her force of mind and strength of body into her hospital work, and found neither in excess of her need in overcoming the difficulties offered by an entirely uncongenial pursuit. Again and again heart and soul sickened at her task, and but for the occasional word of praise or encouragement from Richard, she would have left at the end of a month's trial.

One day when Richard noticed that Johanna's face was as white as that of the patient she was tending, he said :

'I am afraid your work tries your health more than you will admit. Do you feel as if you would like to go for a walk in the fresh air ?'

She shook her head. 'Not to-day. If I went out now I might be tempted not to

come back again. I want nothing but to hear you say that I am beginning to understand my work, and making a little progress, however slight and slow. If you can tell me that, I shall have strength for anything.' And thus directly appealed to, he gave Johanna the praise and encouragement on which she lived, and in the strength of that meat she worked for many days.

No one was so elated by praise from Mr. Dare, or so cast down by a hint of disapproval, as Sister Johanna; and it was supposed among her fellow-nurses that she went in great fear of the celebrated surgeon. Those days in which she did not see Richard were blank indeed, and she had time to realise in what a narrow world she lived, by what petty strifes and jealousies she was surrounded. Kindness and generosity, of course, she met with, but in no greater proportion than they are to be found in the wider world outside the hospital walls.

Sister Johanna was not generally popular

among the nurses, for a variety of small reasons that, taken altogether, excluded her from their sympathy, and condemned her to a great deal of loneliness. She was the best-looking woman in the hospital, the best educated, and moreover she was a lady—qualities that did not recommend her to those who possessed none of them. But the more refined among them appreciated her reserve, her tact and delicate feeling, and entire devotion to her duty; to account for which they attributed to Sister Johanna motives different from those which really actuated her.

Very various impulses had brought together the staff of nurses at the Eastminster Hospital. As they did not belong to a Sisterhood, probably but few of them had taken up the work from purely religious motives, while a certain number had become nurses because they were unmarried, and in want of a definite occupation. Others, again, adopted the life because it was the thing

to do nowadays, while the bulk had come there wholly and solely for a livelihood. A few sentimentally-minded women, with no grasp of the realities of their arduous profession, had adopted it in the fond belief that a nurse's duties consisted of nothing more trying than fanning a fainting patient, or moistening his brow with eau de Cologne, and these invariably left the hospital in a short time disenchanted, but in possession of the truth of the matter, which they could not have acquired so well elsewhere.

CHAPTER XIX

SISTER JOHANNA AT WORK

Love one human being with warmth and purity, and thou wilt love the world.—JEAN PAUL.

WHEN Johanna had passed through the drudgery involved in the early stages of her profession, and by continual effort had overcome her repugnance to work for which she had no natural inclination, her days passed quickly if not agreeably. The weeks sped by with such rapidity it seemed always to be Saturday night, and she vainly endeavouring to catch Time by the fetlock, instead of the forelock, as he hurried past. In her zeal she would have liked to live in a land where it was always Monday morning, to be for ever returning invigorated to her task, to cancel old mistakes and apply freshly acquired knowledge. Her promotion came rapidly, and she

was now in charge of a male ward of twenty-four patients, with a staff of day and night nurses working under her. She took a distinct pride in justifying the opinion Richard expressed of her when he first suggested that she should become a hospital nurse. It was solely for his sake and at his bidding that she had turned her bright energies into an uncongenial channel, and she was surprised to find that she was gradually becoming interested in her work for its own sake. Her occupation left her no time for personal hopes, fears, or regret; and this gave her a sense of emancipation that strengthened her for her duty.

For some time past Richard had been in private practice, and ceased to live in the hospital as house surgeon. But Johanna felt no inclination to leave on that account, as she had imagined that she should do. On Tuesdays and Saturdays he visited the hospital as consulting and operating surgeon, and usually found time for a little talk with her in

her sitting-room before he left. These were her red-letter days, and, though her duties then were doubly arduous, because Richard always required her to attend him in the operating theatre, they were the days in the week best worth living, and one word of praise from her master made up for all.

As Johanna gradually outgrew the personal motive that had led her to become a nurse, she became sufficiently at leisure from herself to take a lively interest in the patients under her care. Her natural qualities well fitted her to deal with all sorts and conditions of men, and the unconventional life she had led with her uncle had given her wider sympathies and greater tolerance than is to be expected from the average lady. She was always ready to listen to what her patients had to say, and knew exactly the right method to take with each individually; yet she was despotic mistress of her ward, and the roughest man in it never used bad or coarse language a second time in her presence. She often had cause to

bless her sense of humour, which constantly threw a grotesque light on the gloomiest scene.

Sister Johanna's ward was a long narrow room with folding doors at either end. There was a large fireplace in the middle, and to right and left of it four high windows, with six beds under them and twelve opposite, making twenty-four in all. The walls were stained a cheerful blue and hung with engravings of more or less—generally less—merit, that Johanna had extorted, as a practical proof of sympathy with the patients, from divers ladies who had taken up the fashion of hospital visiting. The floor was of polished wood, bright as glass, unrelieved by carpet or rug, and the nurses padded about on it without slipping in their soft shoes.

It was a marvel to Johanna how anyone used to quiet and privacy in his own home when he is ill, ever recovers in a hospital, where he can have neither the one nor the other. The crowd of medical students alone,

who accompanied and thronged about the doctors when they made the round of the wards, seemed in itself enough to kill a sensitive and nervous patient. They clustered like bees about any especially interesting case, and the more hideous the sights they saw, or the details they listened to, the more delighted they were, and the more copious the notes they took. The population of the ward was a rapidly changing one; usually a bed scarcely had time to grow cold before it was in possession of a fresh occupant. The patients were of all ages, from children to old men, drawn from different grades of society, and often from distant countries. This was never more obvious than when one day Johanna found, to her amusement, that in addition to the usual English element, the foreign was represented by a Yankee, a Frenchman, two Germans, a Chinaman, and a negro. By chance the Yankee on the day of his arrival was put in the next bed to the negro, but after much nasal vituperation the arrange-

ment had to be altered for peace and quiet's sake, and the equality of man asserted by the removal of the black brother to the end of the ward. As many trades were represented as nationalities; and Johanna became acquainted with tailors, policemen, costermongers, grave-diggers, and cab-drivers, not to make the list too long, and from each she learned something that interested or amused her.

There were also at times among the motley assembly some of those mysterious gentlemen of no particular calling or visible means of subsistence who live in London at the back of everywhere, that a crowd or an accident draws into the street in swarms, as rain brings worms to the surface of the soil. They are always open to any odd job that is highly paid for and neither skilful nor arduous in its nature, and they attend demonstrations in the Park, in long coats and woollen comforters, and never without a short pipe and tobacco, which presumably cost money; but

where they sleep at night, when they are not in hospital, is matter of conjecture.

One of her patients who afforded Johanna considerable amusement was a genteel and sensitive young clerk, who had it much on his mind to explain how he came to be in such a vulgar institution as a public hospital. He was consumed by a haunting fear lest, when he had recovered and returned to his place in the office of Messrs. Scrawley and McNibb, he might be recognised in the street and spoken to by one of his fellow-patients, a chimney-sweep of too friendly a disposition. 'His face, you know, Sister, would be black in the pursuit of his avocation, and I shouldn't know him; but he'd see me a mile off and run after me, and if a man in my position is seen being spoken to by a sweep, I shall be ruined,' said the sensitive little clerk.

Johanna always parted on kindly terms with patients who had been for any length of time under her care, and at bidding them good-bye she sometimes received touching as well

as grotesque tokens of gratitude and goodwill. An old cabman who had been severely injured by a fall from the box of his four-wheeler, and had spent six weeks in the hospital, was exceedingly anxious to express his sense of obligation to the Sister in some tangible form, and in order to do so he revived one of the lost arts of his youth. He laboriously knitted a single long and strong—what shall I call it? —*honi soit qui mal y pense*, but he never got so far as the second, and presented the one lone specimen of its kind to Sister Johanna as a thankoffering. It was a ligature of abnormal length and strength, and would have proved a destructive engine as a means of suicide; but for any other practical purpose useless, and it remained a quaint embodiment of gratitude.

Other grateful patients at parting volunteered to the Sister useful information concerning their own trade or craft, which they certainly would not have imparted to anyone else for a consideration. A street seller of cheap ices strongly cautioned her against buying

penny coloured ices, whatever the temptation might be, for a reason that was evidently a trade secret and not to be divulged. If the Sister 'ad a fancy for ices, let her stick to the white 'uns, which she promised to do, and having delivered his friendly warning he departed. A genial butler, when he was discharged from the hospital cured, was convinced that the Sister would be exceedingly anxious to know how her late patient stood the change back to his kitchen, and offered to teach her the kind of whistle she must give at the area gate when she called in the dusk to inquire after Mr. Tummas.

The most touching gratitude Johanna ever met with was from a patient who received no more care and attention than any other of his fellow-sufferers. He was a crossing-sweeper, a very old and poor man, who had been run over, and his leg broken at the crossing he had swept for thirty years, and where, from long habit, he felt as secure among the ever rolling stream of vehicles as a gentleman feels in his

library chair. He was very patient and thankful for everything that was done for his comfort, but he had no rallying power, and died in a week after the amputation of his leg. On the day of his death he insisted on Sister Johanna giving him a small parcel out of his locker, wrapped in a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief, and when he received it he hid it under the bed-clothes in an agitated and mysterious manner.

'Sister,' he whispered, 'I've neither wife nor child to provide for, nor nobody. I'm free to leave my property where I like, without robbing my own kin, and there'll be no lawsuits nor nothing over what I've done when I'm gone. I never met with a kinder woman than what you are, Sister; and if folks knew the comfort of being in your ward, they'd break their arms and legs like sticks, a-purpose to come 'ere and be nursed by you.'

The old man was growing excited, and Johanna attempted to soothe him.

'No! I must say what I've got to say while

I can! I'm a-going to endow this 'ere hospital, I am, with all my property'—and he patted the bed-clothes over the precious parcel knotted in the blue handkerchief—'and what I ask is, as you'll see to it for me when I'm dead, Sister, but nobody shall touch it while I can hold on to it myself. Every penny as I've got, and it's all earned honest, I leave to this 'ere hospital and its heirs for ever, and be sure as my name's printed among the benefactors o' this hospital. Proverbs, Mr. Joshua Proverbs, is my name,' and within four-and-twenty hours from that time the Eastminster Hospital was the recipient of a legacy.

Johanna unknotted the blue handkerchief and opened the parcel in the presence of the house surgeon, and together they counted the deceased crossing-sweeper's hoard—one pound eight shillings and ninepence halfpenny in coppers—and the next annual report of the hospital duly entered and acknowledged the bequest of the late Mr. Joshua Proverbs.

One day, after Richard had ceased to be

house surgeon, he was visiting the hospital as usual, when among the patients in Johanna's ward he saw a face that carried him back to his early life in London. The sullen, unwashed-looking man, suffering from an injury to the knee-joint, was Jakins, good Peter Collingwood's assistant, and no one else. He knew him at once, and when he spoke the voice was the voice of Jakins, and so were the hands, which were red as when they first attracted Richard's astonished gaze. As their eyes met Richard's face broadened into a smile, and the comedy in the double-bedded attic rose vividly in his memory.

'Hallo! Jakins, old fellow, I should have known you anywhere! This is bad luck for you to be here with a damaged knee—how did you come by it?' and the assistant's face grew dark red, and he plunged under the bedclothes as though he expected a blow on the head.

'Come up, don't be a fool!' he said good-humouredly, 'you needn't be afraid of me

now,' and the patient gradually emerged from the blankets and cast a glance of such mingled distrust and resentment at Richard that he and Johanna forgot their professional behaviour and laughed aloud.

'Mr. Dare has had many worse cases than yours; don't be afraid; let him examine your knee,' said Johanna consolingly.

'It is a bad job for me to get a knee like this, me as was never violent in my life, but was all for peace and quietness. It's an affliction I never expected to 'ave 'ad,' said the patient resentfully.

'I can't deny that it's a bad knee, and likely to be troublesome, but you've come to the right place to have it cured. I've had a number of cases like yours.'

'I shouldn't ha' come 'ere if I'd ha' known as you was one of the doctors, I can tell you,' said Jakins, his dark cheeks puffed with sulks. 'It ain't very pleasant to be doctored by a chap as once knocked you down and nearly killed you!'

'Well, here you are, Jakins; it's too late to regret that you've come here; you must just make the best of it. If you didn't like the weight of my hand once, you can try now if you like its skill any better, and we'll soon see if we can't put you to rights,' and having done all that he could for him then, Richard nodded good-humouredly at the ill-favoured fellow, and bade him good-morning.

Jakins, though a most commonplace man, produced an extraordinary impression on those whose duty it was to wait on him in his illness. It was his unenviable distinction, among Johanna's many patients, to be the only nature she had ever met with apparently inaccessible to kindness and goodwill. He was entirely absorbed in the contemplation of his own symptoms, doggedly convinced that he was the head martyr in the universe, unable, perhaps, and certainly unwilling, to take part in the amenities of invalid life. During the whole of his six weeks' stay in the hospital, the pleasing little words, 'Thank you!' were

never once surprised from his lips, though Johanna laid frequent traps for them in the shape of unexpected gifts of fruit and flowers. All was taken as his due, or as less than his due, while he was inflated with morbid vanity because his case was the only one of its kind in the ward, where nine diseases were apportioned among twenty-four patients. Out of this limited number to have one disease all to himself was gratifying to his invalid egotism, and he always disliked sharing anything with anyone. Jakins was entirely indifferent to the sufferings of his fellow-patients, and exacted more attention from the nurses than all the rest of the ward put together, and was clamorous in his complaints of any imagined neglect on the part of the doctors. He was sure that Mr. Dare 'showed favour,' for he'd timed it, and found that he was full ten minutes longer bandaging the leg of the man in the next bed than he was in dressing his knee, and he had particularly noticed the quality of the linen used was

superior to that he thought good enough for him. Finally Jakins departed from the hospital cured, but hoarse with grumbling, and without having the civility to say good-bye to a single nurse, doctor, or patient, who had been his companions for so many weeks.

CHAPTER XX

PATIENT AND DOCTOR

That which upholdeth him, that thee upholds—his honour.
King John.

While Mrs. Peveril was absorbed in a whirl of gaiety, and diverting herself by watching the effect of her beauty and delicate flattery on the unsophisticated Richard Dare, her husband was labouring at his desk twelve hours a day. Her puzzle was how to kill time most effectually, while the problem he was bent on solving was how he might best, by redeeming every hour, succeed in compressing the work of years into a few months. While she was a spendthrift of time, he had become a niggard of time, and clutched at the flying moments as a miser clutches at gold. For Colonel Peveril had made a discovery that altered the entire aspect of life, and helped him to see

things as they really were, and in just proportion and relation to each other. He had recognised certain symptoms in himself that convinced him that he was attacked by the same malady his father had died of at his age. The discovery was a great shock to the silent, self-contained man, and he bore it alone. It did not occur to him to break through the habit of years and take his wife into his confidence.

His great distress was the fear lest he should die leaving his history of modern Military Campaigns in Europe unfinished. He had set himself a task to complete before the night came in which no man can work, and now twilight had fallen and it was still far from finished. He worked with a feverish energy that made him ill, but his wife, who had very little of his company, did not notice any change in his manner or appearance. Colonel Peveril had a dim, uneasy sense of something wanting in his wife and in himself. He was conscious that their marriage was a

failure, though how to make it otherwise he had not the slightest idea. Then a sympathetic thought occurred to him that had never entered his mind before; if he was unhappy it was possible that his young wife might be unhappy also. But it was a thought that bore no fruit. It had come too late. What overtures of kindliness the sick man might make from the sadness of his heart were not seen or understood by the wife, who nad learned too well to expect neither confidence nor expressions of affection from her husband.

Several times Colonel Peveril had been impelled to leave his work and go to the drawing-room in quest of his wife. He hardly knew why he went. Probably he would have had nothing to say if he had found her there; yet a word or look of kindness from her would have fallen like dew on his bruised spirit. But Mrs. Peveril was always either out or engaged with company when he wanted to see her, and he would return to his study

with bowed head and a vague sense that he was seeking what he should never find. The approach of death cannot alter a man's nature, but it may call forth feelings that have lain dormant, or have been well-nigh crushed out of existence, in the hardness and hurry of life. With all his stoicism, Colonel Peveril craved human sympathy. He had never been ready in offering sympathy to others, and he imagined he had lived so far very well without receiving it; but now he would have blessed his wife if she had taken his hand in hers, and said, 'You are ill, what can I do for you?' The Colonel continued his work for some months without seeing a doctor: he preferred to die his own way. But he had an urgent desire to know how long he was likely to live, and it was worth while overcoming his reluctance to consult a doctor, to be told in so many words what might be the probable duration of his life. He decided to go to a specialist, and he heard on all hands that Mr. Dare was the best man for cancer,

and with an unusual power of correct diagnosis in obscure cases.

He wrote the well-known surgeon's name and address in his note-book, little thinking that Mr. Dare was a constant visitor at his house, and a greater admirer of his wife than he had been himself at any period of his life.

The following day Colonel Peveril carried out his intention of consulting Mr. Dare, and by eleven o'clock on a cheerless November morning he was seated in the dreary dining-room of a house in a grimly respectable street near Cavendish Square, awaiting with other victims his summons to the great man's presence. The murky light of a London winter day scarcely served to show the subjects of the dim oil-paintings that broke the monotony of the drab walls, and could not penetrate into the corners of the room, which were dark with solid gloom. The mantelpiece, decorated with sooty drapery, was surmounted by a black marble clock like a miniature tombstone, that emphasised the

silence with a dull ticking, and the polished table was strewn with papers and magazines, supposed to be capable of beguiling the preoccupied minds of patients during the inevitable period of waiting.

What a company was assembled in that gaunt dining-room, representing how much of real and imaginary suffering! In the arm-chair by the fire was seated a dropsical old gentleman with flaccid sallow cheeks, leaning forward with both puffed hands resting on his stick, staring dully before him, with eyes so prominent it seemed an effort to him to wink, and breathing stertorously through his loose pallid lips. At times a strangling cough seized him in its grip, when the prominent eyes almost started from their sockets. At the table, a cadaverous-looking young man was turning over the pages of an illustrated paper, with thin yellow fingers tipped with violet-coloured nails, and by the door sat an elderly lady, glancing restlessly about her, coughing nervously into her gloved hand, and then

inhaling smelling-salts for a change of occupation. A boy with enlarged tonsils and swollen glands, who walked round the room, touching every object within reach with a moist stumpy finger, making fractious remarks to his nurse in a throaty voice, and Colonel Peveril, completed the company in the great surgeon's waiting room.

From time to time the door opened noiselessly, and a servant in rusty black uttered, in a melancholy voice, the name of the patient summoned to the consulting-room, with as much solemnity as though he were calling each in turn to be buried.

When the Colonel had waited for an hour in these dispiriting surroundings, he began to grow impatient, looked frequently at his watch, compared its statement with that of the sepulchral clock on the mantelpiece, then went to the window, and with his hands in his pockets looked out into the cheerless street, where the pavement was black with rain, and passing umbrellas wet and shining.

At length, just as he had made up his mind to go away and call another day, his summons came, and he left the company in the waiting-room reduced to the emaciated young man and the boy with the enlarged tonsils.

The Colonel followed his silent guide across the dark hall, and was shown into a room at the back of the house, compared with which the one he had quitted was light and cheerful. Mr. Dare was seated pen in hand at his writing-table, having just mentally pronounced sentence of death on the dropsical gentleman of the prominent eyes and stertorous breathing, when the door closed, and he was left alone with a very different patient.

A minute ago and the surgeon's mind was saturated with the case before him. Nothing existed for him but the one disease on the amelioration of which his keen faculties were concentrated. But now a fresh subject presented itself for consideration, and his trained intellect instantly put aside the matter

engrossing his thoughts, and reduced itself once more to a purely receptive attitude.

The servant had laid Colonel Peveril's card on the table, but Richard inadvertently covered it with a book, and as he had failed to catch the name, uttered in scarcely audible tones, when the patient was ushered into the room, he did not at first know with whom he was speaking. But he was impressed by the fine and dignified appearance of the stranger. He admired the clear-cut features, the powerful reticent mouth and penetrating eyes, while he noted a certain imperious expression, as of one fitted to command and accustomed to be obeyed. Both the manner and appearance of his patient interested him, and he found himself wishing he knew something of the stranger before him. He motioned the Colonel to take the only chair in the room on which the light fell, and turning his eyes full on his face he read the physical meaning of it, as though it were a page printed in clear type.

He speedily discovered the nature of his

incurable malady, and was astonished at his patient's calmness and perfect knowledge of his position. There was scarcely an unhealthy development of mind or body with which Richard was not familiar, and he was acquainted with every shade of morbid self-consciousness begotten of the egotism of suffering in the invalid, real or imaginary. Patients had consulted him in fright and tremor piteous to behold, and listened to his opinion with dread and longing; while others had left the consulting-room resentful and aggrieved when he assured them it was not cancer that ailed them, and that if, metaphorically speaking, they would take up their bed and walk, there was no reason why they should not do so there and then. But here was a man labouring under a mortal disease, and, as he soon ascertained, in a part of the body where it would be impossible to operate for his relief, recounting his own deadly symptoms as calmly as though they were some one else's with whom he was not concerned,

and anxious only to be told the probable duration of his life. He gave a clear account of himself without egotism, simply stating what was necessary for a doctor to know; then fixing his piercing grey eyes on the oracle, asked, 'And now can you tell me how long this will last?'

Once in his experience Richard had seen fatal results follow from telling a man point-blank that he must shortly die, and he had resolved in consequence, however he might be importuned to do so, never again to speak positively on the subject to the patient himself. For it is a very different thing to believe one has not long to live, from being authoritatively assured that one is within a few weeks or days of death. Not till then does a man know how unacknowledged to himself he clings to life, at what pitiful straws he clutches in the deep waters engulfing him. And this sudden withdrawal of all support in hearing the death sentence pronounced, Richard had seen act on the patient like a physical blow, literally

killing him, before the disease from which he suffered had run its due course.

Colonel Peveril looked steadily in the doctor's face, and again said, 'Can you tell me how long this will last?'

Richard rightly judged his patient to be a man of courage and fortitude, but he did not give a direct reply to the question, and when he asked him his profession he seemed surprised, for he had sent in his card, and his name had been announced as he entered the room.

The keen grey eyes were still fixed upon him, and looking his patient full in the face Richard said with quiet emphasis, 'If you have matters of importance to arrange, you would be wise to attend to them; but you must permit yourself no anxiety, no excitement, no strong emotion of any kind.'

Colonel Peveril's face relaxed into a fine ironical smile.

'My dear sir, this would be suitable advice to offer to an old cow ruminating in a meadow,

but it is a mockery to give such counsel to a rational being, to whom life must mean thought and emotion, the more so as he has much work to do and little time to do it in;' and while he was speaking Richard again sought for the missing card among his papers.

'I see your point perfectly. I should feel as you do if such advice was offered to me. But we doctors are sometimes obliged to prescribe impossibilities, that some good may be achieved in striving after the unattainable, though we have all more power over our feelings and emotions than we give ourselves credit for, till we are put to the test. I believe that your life might be considerably prolonged by carefully avoiding every cause of bodily fatigue and mental excitement.'

'How long do you mean by considerably?' asked the patient quietly, though an eager flash in his eyes betokened that he was not insensitive, but a man wearing armour. 'The same words do not signify the same things to

the living and the dying; they do not speak the same language. Are you using the expression "considerably prolonged" as I might have understood it formerly, when it would have meant several years, or as a man must take it whose days are numbered, to whom even a few weeks might be a respite?'

Richard looked ruefully at the grave, self-controlled face, that interested and attracted him as no patient's had done before, and he would have given much to be able to assure him that his illness was the outcome of an overwrought nervous system, the cure of which lay mostly in his own hands.

'Your question is difficult to answer, and even if I could speak definitely, I am afraid it would be of little practical use to you,' he replied dubiously, when he caught sight of the truant card projecting from underneath a pamphlet, glanced at it and read the name—'Colonel Peveril.'

Colonel Peveril of all men in the world! Richard crushed the card in his hand, while

in the strong revulsion of feeling the blood rushed to his head with a surging sound, for a moment everything grew dark, and his patient's face a blot before him. The Colonel had removed his eyes from Richard, and was looking at his own hand that rested on the edge of the table beside him, when he said in the same quiet voice, 'Tell me candidly, if I were able to carry out your instructions to the letter, how long will this disease allow me to live?'

The doctor's face was now as pale as the patient's. A storm of temptation assailed the inner citadel of his being. The man before him was Margaret Peveril's husband, and he believed that his life, and how frail that was Richard had not known till now, was the sole barrier between him and the possession of the woman he loved.

He knew that under no circumstances could Colonel Peveril live long, and it was in his power to make it still shorter by bluntly telling him of his condition, and destroying

the very spring of hope that maintains a feeble life. He could set Margaret free to become his own by merely doing what his patient urged him to do, telling him the truth without reservation. The man was delivered bound into his hands.

'You need not fear to tell me the truth. How long have I to live?' said the Colonel in calm, even tones.

Richard wiped the moisture from his brow, but he could not speak. A word from him, a mere shaping of the lips to utter certain sounds, would send this man out of the world before his time as surely as if he killed him with his own hand. All the devils in hell whispered to him to do this thing, to hurry the man out of life and hasten the day of his own happiness, which he believed that life alone hindered. Never had he wished harm to Margaret's husband, though he had hated him in the abstract as the obstacle in his way; but now that he was delivered into his hand, a base temptation assailed him,

casting a foul shadow over his mind even by its passing presence. He fought against it as a man struggles with deadly nightmare, a deep unspoken cry to God rose from his heart, and mustering strength to cast the incubus from him, he turned steadfastly to the path of his plain duty.

Then he spoke slowly and emphatically.

'I cannot answer your question definitely, nor would I if I could. It would be most injurious to you to have a fixed idea as to the duration of your life,' and he looked at him with eyes that were once more clear and fearless.

'But tell me as nearly as you can,' continued the Colonel with strange persistence. 'It is essential to me to know how long I have to live. You need not fear giving me an injurious shock: I have known for some time past that my disease was incurable, and have acted on the knowledge. Is it likely to last one or two years?'

'Not two, I think.'

'Not even if I lived a merely torpid existence?'

Richard shook his head.

'After all it does not really matter, but I have a right to be inquisitive on a point that concerns myself more than anyone else,' said the Colonel as though thinking aloud. 'I am a lonely man. No one will rejoice if my life is prolonged, nor mourn if it ends abruptly. I wish to finish a book I am writing on military matters that I believe would be of interest and value—that is why I am anxious to know the time I may still call my own. But if I hear the word of command to march before my task is finished, I am a soldier and know how to obey orders without disputing. The work I am not allowed to complete, another will do as well or better than myself.'

Then, as though dismissing that particular train of thought, he said in a changed tone of voice:

'Supposing that I lived as I chose, and

endeavoured to compress into a short space all the happiness and pleasure I have missed in life, how long would you give me then?'

'Under those circumstances you would be simply committing suicide, and the pace at which you killed yourself would rest with yourself,' replied Richard with energy.

Colonel Peveril was again looking at his hand, thinking how soon it might be cold and powerless that was now as strong to guide the pen as it had been to grasp the sword.

'Thank you,' he said, and laid his fee on the doctor's table; and without a word further, took up his hat, wished him good morning, and left the room.

The tension of the interview had been almost more than Richard could bear, and as soon as he was alone he leaned his throbbing head on his hands and covered his eyes. The tragedy, the pity of it! The Colonel's manly courage, his modest estimate of his worth and position in the world, the certainty with which

he spoke of his life being of no interest to anyone but himself, and that even not very keen, impressed him profoundly. And this was Margaret's husband, who must once have loved her, or why did he make her his wife? But now the thought of leaving her for ever was apparently a matter of indifference to him, and he spoke as one who believed that he lived unloved and would die unmourned. Richard was sorry for the man from his heart, and his own conscience was clear that he had not broken up such happiness as might once have been his. When he became acquainted with Mrs. Peveril she and her husband had drifted so far apart that no third person could estrange them further: he was not to blame in that respect. Surely if Colonel Peveril's wife knew what strength and heroism was locked up in that self-contained nature, she must honour him if she could not love him. Such a man might have been a tower of strength to a passionate, impulsive woman.

But Richard's reverie was cut short by the

sound of steps approaching the door, and he rose and dropped the Colonel's fee into the collecting-box for the Eastminster Hospital on the mantelpiece, as though he were unwilling to touch his money, and seated himself at his table once more, in readiness for whatever fate might send him in the way of a patient. A minute later and he was devoting all his attention to the case of the boy with the enlarged tonsils, whom he regarded merely as an organism afflicted with swollen glands, a medical study pure and simple, having no bearing whatever on deeper or higher matters.

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE INTERVIEW

He that speaks the truth will find himself in sufficiently dramatic situations.—Prof. Wilson.

The profound impression produced on Richard by his interview with Colonel Peveril made it impossible for him to visit Mrs. Peveril as he had formerly done. So long as her husband was unknown and practically non-existent to him, a mere unpleasant abstraction, he did not scruple to frequent his house, with little respect for the man who so insanely neglected his beautiful young wife. But now that the Colonel was revealed in another character than merely that of Mrs. Peveril's husband, he had interested him deeply, and compelled his respect, and he was anxious to do him justice as far as possible. Richard had made as cor-

rect a spiritual as physical diagnosis of his patient's case. He had looked into the soul of the man, and seen the calm courage of a strong, self-reliant nature that bears its own burdens in unloved solitude, with fortitude unshaken by the inevitable rapid approach of death. If a doctor has eyes to see, no one has a better opportunity than he of studying the weaknesses of humanity. He sees his patients usually disorganised both in mind and body, and so far Richard had never known man or woman receive what was tantamount to a sentence of death with the same cool courage as Colonel Peveril. It set Richard thinking much, and asking himself many questions, and among them—whither was he drifting? The fascination Mrs. Peveril exercised over him had led him to think meanly of a man whom, if he had not known his wife first, he should have sought for his honoured friend. In his heart of hearts, feeling his fetters gall him, he wished that Margaret had remained the bright being, remote and inaccessible, that had influenced his

early life and decided his destiny. His worship of her would not then have interfered with the love between him and Johanna that had been crushed in its beginning. But in an unpropitious hour the goddess had descended from the heights, and though the creature of his imagination did not resemble the ideal he had formed of her, she had power to cast a glamour over him that held him in thrall.

Mrs. Peveril's influence was always strongest with Richard when he was in her presence. It was not the spirit of the woman, but the power of her beautiful personality that moved him; and even that could not have affected him so deeply, had he not idealised her since his boyhood. She had seen his adoration, accepted it, and lured him on in his inexperience, till he had passed the point at which he could free himself by any act of his own. But after the sharp struggle with himself in the consulting-room, he had realised how poor a part he was playing. How much more dignified than himself was the calm, strong man, free from pas-

sion and master of himself, and who, though smitten with death, was quietly working on undaunted till the end. He was afraid from the Colonel's manner when he said good-bye, that he would neither send for him, nor come to consult him again, and he wrote to him at once, suggesting further alleviations of his suffering, where a remedy was out of the question. Richard was astonished that Mrs. Peveril had not spoken to him on the subject of her husband's health. That the Colonel had told his wife he was ill, he did not for a moment suppose; but was it possible that anyone could live in the same house with a man so stricken, and not be aware of it? Where could her observation be, her humanity he almost said, if she had not noticed his state? A few days ago and he had envied Colonel Peveril his wife: he now found himself instead envying the man his courage and fortitude.

For a month Richard held to his resolution, and did not enter Colonel Peveril's

house. He met Mrs. Peveril several times in public, but as that had the appearance of being accidental, and might indicate a falling off in his devotion, he was called to heel with no uncertain voice. He received a shower of imperious notes, demanding the reason of the cessation of his visits, and an apology for it, whatever the cause might be. But he would not commit his reasons to paper, and instead he asked Mrs. Peveril to meet him at the National Gallery early on the following afternoon, and he would answer any questions she chose to put: he was quite ready to stand a *vivâ voce* examination. 'Let us meet in the Venetian Room,' he wrote, 'opposite the portrait of a lady by Paris Bordone. You know the one I mean, the lady with the magnificent warm brown eyes and deep golden hair, who stands facing you so bravely with her hand on her hip, dressed in red that harmonises with her wonderful tints. She is like you in feature, colour, and expression. I do not know who she was, but she was no

nonentity, and I should like to know her history.'

Richard was the first to arrive at the appointed time and place, and he spent a very uncomfortable ten minutes, not knowing how he should best broach the subject that was so convincingly clear to his own mind. It had been difficult for him to spare time to meet Mrs. Peveril, and he hoped she would not be very late, imagining in his ignorance that she would be unlikely to have any other engagement so early in the afternoon. He was mistaken, however, for she had an appointment at the South Kensington Museum with another of her admirers, who also preferred not to visit her at her own house, though from motives far different from Richard's. But with a little management she contrived to oblige both her friends, and her coachman, in obedience to stringent orders, drove eastward through the crowded streets as though he were trying to catch the last train for Paradise. On first meeting, Mrs. Peveril was dis-

posed to be haughty, but Richard's manner was so respectful and dignified, it was not worth continuing in that strain, and she suddenly changed her manner.

'Why have you not replied to my notes?' she asked, with a straightforwardness Richard himself could not have surpassed.

'Because there are some things that are better spoken than written, and I hoped that you would forgive me putting you to the trouble of meeting me here for a little conversation,' and he seated himself on the chair nearest to her as he spoke.

'It has not been very convenient to come here this afternoon, but when you promise to explain your extraordinary conduct I don't think of my own convenience, and I have no pride to prevent me from asking for the fullest explanation. Why have you not come to see me for a month, a whole month past, you who for two years have been my most constant and welcome visitor?' and as she raised her eyes to him and he listened to her

low voice, he wondered whether after all it might not have been safer to write, rather than risk an interview with this beautiful creature.

'You do not suppose that I have not missed my visits to you, or that my keeping away so long has been accidental?' he asked.

'Certainly not. I believe you have some motive for conduct that appears so unfriendly, though what it may be I cannot imagine. I will be frank with you, and tell you of a discovery I have made that puzzles me very much. I picked up an envelope this morning on the library floor, evidently dropped there by accident, marked with the date exactly two days after your last call in Berkeley Square, and addressed by you to Colonel Peveril of all persons! See! this is your writing. I should know it anywhere,' and she took from her purse and handed to him the envelope of the letter he had written to the Colonel a month ago.

Richard took it from her and unfolded it. 'Yes, that is my writing,' and he crumpled the envelope in his hand and leaned back in irritating silence.

'Have you no explanation to offer me? You write to my husband, whom you do not know and have never seen, and from that day to this you have kept away from the house. I am unable at present to see the connection between the letter and your changed conduct to me, but I am certain that it exists,' and Mrs. Peveril never looked more aggressively handsome than when she confronted him with a mixture of conviction and defiance in her face, and Richard involuntarily looked up at the Paris Bordone portrait opposite that might have served as a mirror for the lady by his side.

'You are only mistaken in one point, that I have never seen your husband. I saw him on the morning of the day on which I wrote to him, but I have not seen him since. He called on me to consult me professionally.'

Mrs. Peveril's face expressed pure astonishment. 'Why should he do that? Is he not in good health?'

'A man does not usually consult a specialist unless he fears there is reason for doing so. Have you noticed no change in Colonel Peveril's appearance or habits lately? Does he seem to you as well as usual?'

'I really have not noticed,' his wife replied truthfully; 'he is not communicative, and I am not curious. It is you who should be able to tell me how he is.'

Richard thought within himself as he looked into her glowing eyes, 'If I had a wife I should not think it too much to expect that she should notice when I was dying;' but aloud he said: 'Colonel Peveril is very seriously ill: I did not think he had six months to live when he consulted me, and that is a month ago.'

The colour faded from Mrs. Peveril's face, but she did not speak.

'No patient whom I have only seen once

has impressed me as Colonel Peveril has done. He has known for some time past that he suffered from an incurable malady — unhappily it is a case where an operation is impossible—and he consulted me, chiefly to learn how long it would probably last, because he is anxious to finish his work while he can. I could not tell him how short his time was, for the knowledge of it would be a shock that might shorten the span of life that is left to him. I have never seen more noble courage and manly fortitude in a patient. After he left me I thought of some means of alleviating his sufferings, and I wrote to him at once, and that was the letter contained in the envelope you picked up in the library;' and Richard paused for Mrs. Peveril to speak. But she remained silent, listening with clasped hands, remembering the time when the words she had just heard would have sounded like her own death-sentence, and horrified at herself that her chief emotion now should be surprise, sheer surprise.

'Now you will understand that after he came to me as my patient and sought my help, and the insight he gave me into his strong character, that filled me with respect and admiration, I could not enter his house again unknown to him. A relationship was established between us in that one meeting;' and he looked at Mrs. Peveril, longing to hear her speak womanly words of compassion for the brave man who would not long stand in her way. She gently inclined her head in token that she perfectly understood, and then asked scarcely audibly:

'Can I do anything for the Colonel?'

'I cannot tell. Your own tact must guide you. As a doctor I should say be cheerful, but not too cheerful, with him;' and Richard hesitated a moment and then added: 'If you both made a great mistake in your lives, it will do him good not to let him see that you are aware of it.'

The ghost of a smile passed over Mrs. Peveril's pale face.

'Richard, I believe you are more a doctor at heart than a—friend, or anything else.'

'I believe I am,' he said, for the conversation was repugnant to him. 'Come, let us look at the portrait that is so like you, it will help me to explain an idea that has come to me;' and they both rose and stood opposite No. 674, Portrait of a Lady.

'You are the showman, I believe,' said Mrs. Peveril, glancing at Richard.

'Yes, I'll take that responsibility on myself. See how the lady dominates the picture, as she has a right to do, for it is her portrait. She stands life-size squarely before one, with her shapely hand on her hip, while in the background, diminished by distance, is the hall and grand staircase of her palace. Her beauty is of an imperious type that demands instant recognition, and it is only when one has looked and admired long, that one becomes aware of the small, dignified figure of a man dressed in black, standing far behind her at the head of the

flight of marble steps. He is lord both of the palace and of the lady, but the furthest place in the background is assigned to him, and he is a mere detail, but I think a very significant detail, and well worthy of being brought into the foreground beside his wife.'

Mrs. Peveril looked at the Venetian beauty with heightened colour.

'I see what you mean, but you concede the point that the lady has a right to dominate the picture.'

'I have been so absorbed by your beauty and kindness,' Richard continued, speaking rapidly and with considerable effort, 'that I have insensibly done what the painter of the picture before us has purposely done; I have belittled a man whom, if I had known, I should have respected immensely, and thrust him utterly into the background. Now I feel happy that I have told you plainly of Colonel Peveril's condition, and given you a man's opinion of his cool courage.'

'You do not look happy.'

'Happy, perhaps, was a strong word to use; I should have said less unhappy.'

Mrs. Peveril's colour came and went rapidly. She was shocked and startled by what she had heard, and not altogether pleased with Richard's manner of communicating to her the unexpected tidings. Richard had often told her that he was of very humble birth, though he had not acquainted her with the circumstances of his boyhood, or the important part she had unconsciously played in his history. She had thought he might be indebted to his lowly origin for his unconventional directness of speech and simple truthfulness—qualities that were not common in her circle, and that piqued and amused her in him. But here was another side of his character, a right-mindedness and refinement of feeling that would not allow him to enter Colonel Peveril's house unknown to him, since he had so strangely compelled his respect. She admired his conduct though she did not like it, because if he felt obliged to absent

himself for very long, she feared that she should lose her power over him. And he was scarcely polite in the allegory, sermon, or whatever it was, of which he had made the portrait of the Venetian lady the text.

Mrs. Peveril turned towards Richard with a weary expression.

'I shall go home now: you have given me much to think of. I dare say I seem a very hard woman to you; I may be so, I cannot tell, I cannot say how I feel—bewildered, I suppose. But I will try to do what Colonel Peveril's doctor would approve for his patient,' and Richard shook hands with her in silence as he saw her into her carriage.

He had done what he conceived to be his duty. He had told Mrs. Peveril plainly of her husband's condition. Further conversation about it was impossible: they were the last persons who could discuss it together. Richard could not wish a brave man's life to be shortened by an hour, and yet his heart gave a bound at the idea of Mrs. Peveril's

approaching widowhood. It was coming surely, perhaps even sooner than he expected ; but whenever it came, one of two things would happen : either he would marry Margaret, or he would regain his freedom. At the moment he could not be sure whether the latter alternative was not the more desirable, so jarred was he by Mrs. Peveril's tone and manner. And yet he tried to think that in the same circumstances no woman could act otherwise than she had done.

It was odd at moments when Mrs. Peveril's attraction for him was ebbing instead of flowing—for it was never at one stay—how thoughts of Johanna obtruded themselves upon him unbidden. He tried to thrust them out of his mind as disloyal to Margaret, but they only returned with the greater pertinacity. Something within him, too, reminded him that Johanna was the first woman he had fallen in love with, with whom he was on an equality, for Margaret had been unapproachable and

unattainable. Is it possible for a man to be in love, in different degrees, with two fair women at once? If it be, it is as though he were called on to make choice between the red rose and the white lily ; he gazes from one to the other in a rapture of admiration of colour, form, and perfume. One moment it is the lily he would have, but then he must forego the rose ; then he would grasp the rose, unmindful of her thorns, but for that he must give up the lily ; and he falls into an agony of indecision. Either flower would have satisfied his sense of beauty and delight, if he had not seen the other with all its rival charms. He must decide. 'The lily is too pure for me!' he thinks in mock humility, 'I should sully its whiteness,' and he stretches out his hand to seize the type of all the joys of life and youth, the blushing, radiant, scented rose.

At noon on the following day, after Richard had seen a troop of patients in his consulting-room, just as he was leaving his house for the hospital a telegram was delivered

to him, containing these words: 'The Colonel died this morning at ten o'clock.' The end had come sooner than Colonel Peveril's doctor expected.

CHAPTER XXII

EMANCIPATION

Here are a few of the unpleasant'st words
That ever blotted paper!—*Merchant of Venice.*

No sooner was Colonel Peveril dead and buried than society busied itself in conjecturing how Mrs. Peveril would conduct her widowhood and celebrate her emancipation. Would she remain in the big dreary house in Berkeley Square, or if she gave it up, where else was she likely to live, in town or country, at home or abroad, and, last and most important, would she or would she not marry again? Some inclined to the idea that she had probably suffered sufficiently in an uncongenial marriage to deter her from running the risk of a second, but the majority decided that she would marry again very soon, and that her

husband would be a young man. A woman, they argued, is not likely to make the same mistake twice in a lifetime.

Richard allowed a week to elapse after the funeral before he ventured to call on Mrs. Peveril. He had written asking if he might see her, and when he arrived at the house, instead of being shown as usual into the drawing-room, as a mark of especial favour he was ushered into her boudoir. Mrs. Peveril was seated at her writing-table, dressed in widow's deepest weeds so far as the material of her mourning was concerned, though its style was more indicative of coquetry than of sorrow. On the wall opposite hung a life-like portrait of the Colonel, and the painter had rendered his expression with so much fidelity that the grey eyes seemed to challenge Richard as he entered the room.

Mrs. Peveril rose from her desk to receive him, and the finished details of her toilet were thrown away upon Richard. A sister woman only could discriminate and appreciate all its

subtlety, but he felt that she was touchingly beautiful in her graceful clinging black robe. Her brilliant waving hair was surmounted by a sort of coronet of fine white net, and her downcast eyes, veiled by long dark lashes, suggested a possibility of tears, past, present, or to come. She looked a very proper widow for the portrait on the wall. As Richard took her hand in his, for a moment even her consummate self-possession seemed to fail her, and he was conscious to the full of the difficulty of his position. To condole with the newly made widow was hypocrisy, to congratulate her indecent, and by tacit consent the Colonel's death was not mentioned by either of them.

'It is more than kind of you to come to see me,' she said in her gentlest tones; 'I was writing to you only a few minutes ago,' and she held up a perfumed note that might have served for a scent sachet, and then made as though she would tear it.

'Pray give it to me! I have kept every

line I ever received from you, and I cannot afford to lose that,' and Mrs. Peveril allowed Richard to take the envelope from her.

'You may have it then, if you really are so ridiculous, on condition that you do not open or read it while you are with me. Is it possible that you keep my notes! I am not at my best with pen and ink, as you must have discovered by now. I think I would rather you burnt them.'

'Don't ask me to do that!' said Richard eagerly; 'you do not know what it is to me to see your writing when I cannot see your face. Sometimes it has been the only token of you I have had for weeks together.'

'Well, if we meet very often, of course I shall not trouble you with many letters; but I warn you my friends love me the less the more they see of me,' and she laughed lightly.

Richard was all gravity.

'That will never be my case: I am neither fickle nor changeable,' and he only lacked

courage to tell her how he had worshipped her for years. All her old fascination was renewed and strengthened by the magic of her presence and the unwonted gentleness of her manner. It seemed possible to Richard that at length he might realise the dream of his youth, and the mere thought made him dizzy. At that moment he could no more have told Margaret Featherstone, as he still called her, of his love than he could have confided it to a stranger.

'I am neither fickle nor changeable,' he repeated; 'I shall prove it to you yet, and you will believe me. I only hope that this note of yours, which I am under orders not to open in your presence, tells me to do something for you! I shall open it the moment I leave you.'

'I am afraid it contains rather a bold request,' said Mrs. Peveril, raising her lovely, deprecating eyes, 'and you positively must not grant it if it entails a moment's inconvenience upon you.'

'Why do you call it a request, when you know your lightest wish is a command I am proud to obey? Whatever this note asks me to do will be done, if it is within mortal power and I am alive to do it,' said Richard, with the directness of speech and manner that never failed to please and amuse Mrs. Peveril, it was so characteristic of the man and unlike anyone else of her acquaintance. She had had her doubts about Richard lately, but they were completely set at rest. As soon as she was a free woman he had come back to her her devoted slave, and the shadow between them was removed. Half an hour face to face with him had re-established her sway, and she resolved to give Richard Dare all the encouragement due to his long, silent devotion. It would be curious and interesting to find out whether she liked him as a declared lover as well as she liked him now; or whether, as she more than suspected, the romantic flavour of their intercourse would not evaporate if it came to straight-

forward love-making, and the mention of marriage.

Richard's impatience to know the nature of Mrs. Peveril's request was so great that he could not wait till he reached his home, and he took a cab, that he might open and read her note then and there. It was brief, but to the point, and ran thus:

'You are always truthful to me; I will try to be so with you. I cannot pretend that what has recently happened is a deep grief to me, but it has shocked and startled me. I find London too sad till my mind is more composed, and I have decided to run over to Paris for three weeks to collect my thoughts. I am leaving to-morrow, and I want to ask you to do me the favour to meet me at Dover on my return: I will telegraph to you the day and the hour. I should like your face to be the first I see in England when I come home again. You will not refuse me this? You have only to think of me as a patient to whom you will be doing a great deal of good, and

the doctor will consent, even if the friend should be unwilling.'

'Go to Paris to collect her thoughts!' exclaimed Richard as the hansom bowled along. Paris does not at once suggest itself to one's mind as the most appropriate place in which to collect one's thoughts, and he was sorry that London would not serve her as well for the purpose. However, whatever Margaret decided to do must be best, and he drew his engagement-book out of his pocket to see if it was possible for him to be absent from town for the greater part of a day in three weeks' time from then. Yes, there was just one day on which it could be done, three weeks and two days hence; and as he took Mrs. Peveril's words literally he wrote to her that night, naming the date, and rapturously promising to meet her as she desired.

All indecision and introspection had melted away under the charm of Mrs. Peveril's presence, and in face of the confidence in him her note testified, Richard no longer doubted

her or himself. The youth's romantic worship had matured into the passion of the man. True, he was socially her inferior, and as yet he was poor, but it was certain his career would lead eventually to wealth as well as honour. His comparative and temporary poverty need not prevent him from asking her to become his wife, and his profession was one for which she always expressed an exaggerated respect.

Richard grew more and more hopeful as he weighed the meaning of Mrs. Peveril's note. Why should she ask him to meet her on her return to England of all her friends and admirers, if it was not because she preferred and trusted him above others? All minor difficulties seemed to melt away, since Colonel Peveril's death had removed the sole insurmountable obstacle. Even his humble birth and bringing-up would not now stand in his way. When he told her his history she would forget the blacksmith's boy in the man whom she had made; for in his ardour he

persuaded himself that, but for Margaret Featherstone's timely appearance, he would still have been working in his father's forge at Dormington.

During Mrs. Peveril's absence fortune smiled on Richard. Several important cases were added to his private practice, and he was more than usually successful in some severe operations at the hospital. Every morning his consulting-room had been filled with patients, and he recounted his triumphs to Johanna with boyish delight. He received his first big fee for an operation, and insisted on her guessing the amount, and as she began with one guinea to tantalise him, and when he shook his head would only advance by single guineas, like an auctioneer, it took thirty guesses to arrive at the grand total.

'When the financial tide does turn, Richard, it will come in with a flood, and we shall have Mr. Dare demanding ten guineas for vaccinating a baby or lancing its gums. For old friendship's sake you must keep me

on your first list of patients,' said Johanna merrily, 'for I can't and won't give you more than a guinea fee.'

The three weeks Mrs. Peveril mentioned as the length of her stay in Paris had come to an end, and Richard, expecting the virtue of rigid punctuality in a lady who measured time solely by her own reckless waste of it, was consumed with anxiety when he failed to receive the promised telegram. Could she have changed her mind, decided that she did not wish him to meet her, and returned without letting him know? A call at the house in Berkeley Square set that idea at rest. Mrs. Peveril had not come home, nor could they say when she was expected, and her letters were duly forwarded to her in Paris. Pride withheld Richard from writing to ask her why she had altered her plans without communicating with him. He would not imitate the meteoric shower of imperious notes that descended on him when she had been displeased with his conduct. If she

was not unfaithfulness itself, her message must shortly come, and he could only wait, and tell his servant to bring every telegram to him the instant it arrived, even if a patient was with him in his consulting-room at the time. And might the kind fates grant that when the summons came, it should be on a day when it was possible to obey it!

A fortnight dragged by, and Richard, kept on the rack, was growing fierce with resentment, when one morning his servant noiselessly entered the consulting-room, laid a brown envelope before him on the desk, and stood waiting beside him. Richard, apologising to his patient for the interruption, opened the telegram, and read: 'Meet me at Dover four o'clock to-morrow afternoon,' with as much important professional gravity as though it had been tidings of an outbreak of cholera in London, or to tell him that the hospital was on fire. 'No answer,' he said, crushing the paper in his hand, and the servant left the room. Then the patient

resumed his melancholy tale of aches, pains, and symptoms that enclosed him like his own skin, but that seemed to the doctor remote as the most distant star in the Milky Way.

Mrs. Peveril's message had thrown Richard into a tumult of feeling in which joy bore no part, and he wrote a prescription in such perturbation of mind, he had almost signed it with her name instead of his own. To-morrow was a day of important work at the hospital, impossible to postpone or depute to another, and nothing short of his own death would be a valid excuse for absenting himself. Hard luck! If Margaret had only kept to her word, and returned at the end of three weeks, he could have met her at Dover and travelled back with her to town, but now all he could do was to telegraph his profound regrets, explaining the nature of his engagement, and promising to call on her on the evening of her arrival at Berkeley Square. Richard felt as though at the end of five weeks' endurance he had stood at the gate of

Paradise only to be haled back by the stern voice of duty, and he despaired of making Mrs. Peveril understand that its commands were even more important than her own.

How differently the day passed from what he had hoped, and instead of travelling up alone with Mrs. Peveril from Dover to London, he was operating in the theatre, and lecturing to the students! At the very moment when she was resentfully reading his telegram on the Admiralty Pier, Richard was inserting a silver tube in the incision he had just made in the windpipe of a child dying of diphtheria, and was at least as usefully employed as he would have been in securing a compartment in the train for Mrs. Peveril. 'I certainly thought I could have trusted Richard to keep a promise,' she said indignantly. 'Duty at the hospital, indeed! If his position there is what they say, he ought to be able to take a holiday when he chooses! But I have always told him he is a doctor first, and lover, friend, and everything else afterwards!' and she felt she

did well to be angry, as she tore up the telegram and threw it to the wind.

But Mrs. Peveril's thoughts were suddenly and pleasantly diverted, by the entrance into the carriage of a gentleman acquaintance whom she had not seen on the boat.

'Lord Haslemere! However did we miss each other at Calais and on the boat! But we cannot escape each other now; we are going to be locked in directly, and then we shall have a cosy chat all the way to London!' and in Lord Haslemere's congenial society Mrs. Peveril forgot for the time being not only the remiss behaviour, but the very existence, of Richard Dare.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STORY TOLD

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass.—*Hamlet.*

A COUPLE of hours after Mrs. Peveril's arrival at home, Richard was shown upstairs to her boudoir, where he found her reclining in an easy-chair, resting after the fatigue of her journey, wearing a marvellous, delicate, silver-grey tea-gown of some soft shimmering material that proclaimed 'Paris' even to his inexperienced eyes. The lamp placed on the table beside her threw a strong upward shadow on Colonel Peveril's portrait, obscuring the penetrating eyes as effectually as the Russian peasant covers up the sacred Icon in his hut

at moments when he does not regard its presence as a blessing.

Mrs. Peveril's good humour was restored by having had a pleasanter journey than seemed likely, her dinner, a glass of champagne, and the anticipation of Richard's apology and explanation. She received him more kindly than he had dared to expect, and allowed him to state his own case, and to hold her hand in his while he did so. She was looking radiantly well and handsome. Paris had evidently done her all the good she desired; she had collected her thoughts there, and gone through several mental processes.

'And so you really could not come to meet me at Dover?' she said at the end of Richard's explanation of the impossibility of being in two places at once, and of simultaneously performing conflicting duties a hundred miles apart.

'Have I not made it clear?' he replied in amazement; 'I could no more have gone to

Dover to-day than I could have gone to Timbuctoo! If you had only returned when you first said you would, a fortnight ago, I could have met you, and I looked forward to it with more delight than I ever felt in my whole life before. You will never know how you have tortured me for a fortnight past, hoping against hope, and expecting your telegram every hour!'

'Did I really promise to return in three weeks?' she asked doubtfully.

'I have it here in your own writing,' he said, producing her last note from his pocket.

Mrs. Peveril waved her hand.

'That's your bad habit of keeping my letters! I really cannot be brought to book in that manner. If I did promise, of course I did; I should not dream of denying it; but it was exceedingly annoying not to be met. However, let us be friends, and as you have come for my forgiveness——'

'Your forgiveness! Dear lady! Well, so let it be. I have come to ask for anything

you can find it in your heart to give me; even for that, among other things, if it pleases you.'

'Then I forgive you, Richard, yet I must own it hurt me a good deal. Flesh and blood rivals I do not fear, but I never expected to find one in bricks and mortar—in the hospital, in fact.'

'Margaret,' broke forth Richard—for the first time calling her by her name with trembling delight—'Margaret, in your heart of hearts you would have despised me if I had run away from my duty, even for your sake. And you make a great mistake if you think that I love my profession better than I love you. Why, it was you who led me to be a doctor. But for you I should never have been what I am and where I am,' and he spoke with a strength of conviction that made Mrs. Peveril sure he believed what he said, though she thought for a moment he was beside himself.

'I led you to be a doctor? What can

you mean? When first we met you were already beginning to be known in your profession.'

'When first we met I was neither a surgeon nor likely to become one. I see you think I am raving, but let me tell you my story, Margaret—I could not have the egoism to do so if you were not the heroine of it—but I must speak, even if you refuse to see me again when I have told you all,' and Richard could scarcely control his agitated voice. Mrs. Peveril's curiosity was raised to the highest pitch.

'Tell me your story,' she said.

'Yes; but first listen to its preface. Margaret, I have loved you for years! Since first I saw your face I have loved you—loved you as a girl—loved you still when I did not know you were married—loved you with despair while you were a wife—and now I dare to love you with hope, and all this since I was a boy of sixteen, and Richard's dark eyes glowed like liquid fire.

'But where did you ever see me when you were a boy?' and Mrs. Peveril's bewilderment was complete.

'Your memory as well as mine must help to fix the time. Can you carry your memory back to an apparently insignificant event that happened to you one summer's day in Dormington, when you were a child of fourteen? You and your father, Mr. Featherstone, were riding together, he on a grey horse, you on a chestnut pony, and your pony cast a shoe—you remember it, don't you?—and you stopped at the blacksmith's, Samuel Atherley's, to have it shod. Say that you remember it,' and he moistened his dry lips as he paused for an instant.

'Yes, I remember the circumstance perfectly, though I don't know that I have thought of it since,' said Mrs. Peveril, becoming more bewildered every instant; 'but what do you know of Dormington, and of my visit to the blacksmith's forge?—where, by the way, the blacksmith was a brutal kind of

man, I remember, and used bad language to his son who was helping him, and I left the smithy and waited outside that I might not hear him. But how come you to know this trivial event in my life, and why does it seem so important to you?' and Mrs. Peveril rose from her chair and stood facing Richard.

'Yes, yes, it is trivial enough in itself, the whole scene between the blacksmith and his son was mean and despicable; and yet that man is my father, and I was that rough boy, who but for you would still be working at the forge.'

'Never!' and Mrs. Peveril in her astonishment started slightly from Richard instead of towards him, and the unconscious meaning of the gesture filled him with dismay.

'I feared I should shock you! I cannot help it; I must speak, even if you refuse to see me again when I have spoken. You shall not continue to think I have only loved you for two years, when you have been the guiding influence of my life. You may remember

that my father was angry at some anatomical experiment I was carrying on in the smithy when I ought to have been doing something else. I hated his trade and had always longed to be a surgeon. I was made for that and nothing else, but I should never have had the courage to follow up my wishes when I did if you had not come into the forge that day. From the moment I saw you I worshipped your childish beauty. You were the first refined lovely creature I had seen, and when my father cursed and threatened me before you, I felt degraded in your presence. I could not endure the wretched life he led me a day longer, and I ran away from home, and my poor mother has since died without knowing where I was or what I was doing. The rest of my story would not interest you now, but through all the hard work of the last twelve years the thought of you has been present with me, and from time to time I have seen you, and refreshed my memory of the face of all faces to me. It was you who un-

consciously decided my career for me, and I have never ceased to love and idealise you since the day I first saw you!'

'To idealise me, ah! there is the danger!' and Mrs. Peveril was now as pale as Richard himself. 'It is a strange story you have told me: it does not seem to belong to our matter-of-fact life and prosaic century. But, Richard, what do you mean by saying that you are Samuel Atherley's son, when your name is Dare?'

'I took the name of Dare as a protection when I first ran away to London. I was afraid if I still bore my father's name that he might find me out and follow me. I have gone through many hardships, Margaret, since your dear face opened up a world of romance and aspiration to me, and my wildest dream is realised to-night. I never completely lost faith in my boyish belief that I should one day approach you as an equal to tell you the great love I have for you; and you, who were once immeasurably remote from the black-

smith's son, have listened to me,' and he bent over her hand and pressed it to his lips.

Mrs. Peveril did not withdraw her hand, but looked at him with eyes as eloquent of disappointment as of surprise.

'Have I displeased you? I never made a secret of my humble birth and bringing-up, and though I have had to ask you to recall a very mean circumstance, it was because it happened on the best day in my life, when the sight of you gave me courage to leave my uncongenial surroundings. Does this displease you?'

'Oh no, no; but I can hardly take it in yet. It seems impossible! You Richard, Mr. Dare, the blacksmith's—I can't bring my lips to frame the word.'

'Let me say it for you, then; I have had to say many painful words before to-day. I am the son of the Dormington blacksmith, and no more responsible for the accident of my birth than you are praiseworthy for having a pedigree that gives you satisfaction to con-

template. If either of us was to be what is called well-born, I am glad it is you, for I can do without it; but I like you to have what you value, and what the world values. No doubt both of us have Adam and Eve looming somewhere in the background of our ancestry. That, however, does not concern us now. To-day we have only to do with our two selves, and with the present. You know that I have loved you for years, and now that you have been gracious and listened to me, I am full of hope, unless you forbid me to hope. But, Margaret, if you cannot return my love, you cannot scorn it. It has made me the man I am.'

'My dear Richard, you belong to the age of romance—a place should have been kept for you at the Round Table—while I am merely a modern nineteenth-century woman. This wonderful story of love and devotion sounds as if it had happened a long time since, in an unknown land, when the world was younger and more innocent. I cannot conceive myself the heroine of such a poem,'

and her eyes filled with tears of genuine regret. She laid her hand on his arm: 'If only I had met you as you now are, when I was a girl, and could have loved you as you deserve to be loved! But leave me now, dear friend, leave me,' for Richard's agitation distressed her, and she dreaded lest he should urge her for a definite promise.

'Do you send me away with hope?' he asked under his breath, 'hope that you will let me win you for my wife?' Mrs. Peveril started at the word—to her the symbol of disillusion and disappointment, a short name for a relation signifying the hardest prose of life.

'Let us be content to remain as we are, Richard!'

'I cannot be content unless you give me a definite hope for the future. I ask you for all, or for nothing;' and he spoke with a manly firmness that Mrs. Peveril admired, even while she foresaw that it might prove troublesome.

'I give you leave to hope,' she whispered, and Richard left her in the very intoxication of joy.

No sooner had the door closed after him than Mrs. Peveril covered her face with her hands, and shut out everything but the romantic vision of Richard Dare's long-lived devotion to her. Then a more prosaic picture presented itself to her mind, and she beheld him as she first saw him, in leather apron, with sleeves rolled up and face begrimed with smoke, blowing the bellows in the smithy. She could bear the thought of that, because love for her had lifted him out of his degradation and given him courage to follow his true vocation. All that was romantic and beautiful, and redounded to her own glory. But what would not bear contemplating for a moment was the father of the gifted and unusual blacksmith's boy. Richard himself was delightful, and unique among her admirers, but his furious, drunken blacksmith father—it was simply impossible

to become Samuel Atherley's daughter-in-law. Of course she should never see him under any circumstances, and by this time he might, and indeed ought to be dead; but even that would make no difference. She remembered him too vividly. Oh, why was Richard so painfully truthful and candid! There was not the slightest necessity for him to establish his identity with that of the blacksmith's boy. Mrs. Peveril had too much faith in her power of fascination to need either chapter or verse to corroborate a statement of its effect: she would have believed it on Richard's mere assertion. She would have been more deeply touched by a less sharply-outlined story of the origin of her lover's devotion.

CHAPTER XXIV

A SURE INSTINCT

Es giebt gewisse Dinge, wo ein Frauenzimmer immer schärfer sieht, als hundert Augen der Mannspersonen.

LESSING.

AT Richard's request Sister Johanna had been transferred from the men's to the women's ward in the hospital, to take charge of the most interesting and important cases, demanding as much skilful attention from the nurse as from the surgeon. She was indifferent as to where she was placed, or what duties were required of her, so long as they were assigned to her by her master, and she worked under his direction. Johanna had now sufficient knowledge to understand and admire Richard's powers as a surgeon, his cool courage, prompt decision, resourcefulness, and skill of hand. She watched his rapid rise in

his profession with enthusiasm, and foresaw the day when Mr. Dare's name would be as well known in the world as it was in the hospital.

But neither gratified ambition, nor the constant exercise of powers in which he delighted, brought happiness and content to Richard; and Johanna noticed in him a growing restlessness and impatience of spirit as of a man ill at ease with himself. He was absent and preoccupied in manner, and seldom now came into her sitting-room for a few minutes' talk with her before he left the hospital. But one day when he did so he startled her by being his own self once more. He called her 'Johanna' without the professional title of Sister before it, and dwelt on reminiscences of their early friendship, and was so exactly the Richard of former times, that in sheer self-defence she was driven to prefer his driest, most chilling manner. She could hardly endure the memory of the time when, as she now believed, happiness had come nearer to her than

she then knew, or than it had ever done since.

But Richard continued mercilessly, reminding her of his German lessons, and of the star-gazing from the drawing-room window that concluded their studies, till, seeing a look of pain on her face, he stopped abruptly.

'We were boy and girl then, boy and girl! We are older now, and wiser, are we not, Johanna?' and he took up a photograph of Uncle John from the mantelpiece and looked at it while he spoke.

'Older, yes, more's the pity! but as to wisdom, have either of us given any particular proof of it, do you think?'

'Oh, come, Johanna, I'm not going to confess my follies, but you surely did a wise thing when you came to this hospital. You're my right hand; I don't know what I should do without you!'

'Then you have had no cause to regret that you press-ganged me into the service?' and Johanna looked so handsome, Richard thought

the mere sight of such a nurse was enough to make a sick man well.

'No, indeed! I marked you for my own that day in your studio, when you were so fierce, and used your penknife in a way that terrified me. I said to myself if only——'

'I don't care to know what you said to yourself, Richard; it's enough that you had your own wilful way, and in spite of my protestations brought me here, and here I have remained.'

'And here you will always remain, I hope. Don't dream of marrying, Johanna!' and Richard spoke from a variety of motives, each prompted by a different form of selfishness.

'I know that if I hold to my profession I must keep single for its sake, but with you it is the very opposite. You will have to marry, Richard. A wife is as much a part of your professional outfit as a stethoscope or a case of surgical instruments.'

'Well, I have not met with a woman yet

willing to merge her own individuality as completely as you think necessary,' and Richard laughed. 'At present I am content with stethoscope and instruments, without the third item in my outfit. Do you know, Johanna, if you left the hospital I am not sure that I should ever enter it again!'

'Oh, but I am very sure you would! You are a surgeon before everything, and care for your patients more than——'

'More than for my friends, were you going to say?' for Johanna's colour had risen, and she was speaking in quick low tones.

'No; I was about to say that for a long time you have been so absorbed in your profession, so taken up with your work, and apparently so indifferent to an old friend, that I have sometimes thought the best way to recall myself to your recollection would be to break my arm, or fall downstairs and turn myself into a patient, and then you would do everything in your power for me!'

Richard looked disturbed.

'Have I been so remiss, so inattentive to my dear friend Johanna lately?'

'You have been so preoccupied, let us say, with your beloved profession, that you have not spoken a word to me for weeks together, except about wounds and bandages and operations, which any of my fellow-nurses can talk of just as well. I know that all this satisfies your whole nature; but only a part of my mind is filled by my duties here, and I long for intelligent speech with you on all sorts of unmedical topics, as we used to have before you became so terribly busy. My life here is very lonely.'

'Forgive me, Johanna! I have been a selfish brute. I've had my full share of worries of one kind and another lately, but so has every one else, and it is no reason why it should turn me into a bear, as it appears to have been doing rapidly. I'll behave better in future,' and he held out his large, capable hand and took hers in his. 'I must be off now, but expect another visit from

me very soon. Say, are we friends again, Johanna?'

'I hope we are friends always,' she said gently disengaging her hand, 'but when you withdraw yourself as you have done lately, it attenuates friendship into mere acquaintance. But I must return to the ward, and you, too, are wanted elsewhere. Good-bye, Richard,' and she thought that he had gone, but just as he closed the door after him, he opened it again and put his head in the room to say:

'By the way, Johanna, a lady I know wishes to see over my wards to-morrow afternoon. If I am not here when she arrives, perhaps you would be at leisure, and so good as to show her round till I come. She's awfully interested in everything about the hospital,' and without mentioning the lady's name or waiting for a reply, he shut the door and hastened along the stone corridor.

Quick as lightning, with unerring instinct Johanna divined the chief motive of Richard's brief visit; of the secondary motives that

impelled him, after long neglect, to call on her again, she knew nothing.

'That's what he really came for, not for my sake at all. His last remark was to his conversation what a postscript is to a letter, containing the whole gist of it. Yes, Richard, I will receive the lady, and when I have seen her I shall know whether I am right or wrong in my surmise.'

On the following afternoon Mrs. Peveril duly appeared in the ward, and, after all, accompanied by Richard. One saw at a glance that she was a widow, though the livery of mourning had passed through the early and less becoming stage supposed to express bereavement, and frankly entered on that in which the sole object of the piquantly severe costume was to display the graceful figure of the wearer to the best advantage.

Johanna advanced to meet them in her picturesque dark-red dress, with white-bibbed apron, cuffs and collar, and snowy cap on her thick dark hair. It was no uniform to deter

a woman from a life devoted to good works, if she retained enough of the old Eve in her nature, to consider her personal appearance while she tended the sick and dying.

Mrs. Peveril found time to whisper with naïve surprise, 'That is the Sister in charge, I suppose; what a strikingly handsome woman!' as though good looks were the last thing she expected to meet with in a hospital nurse; when Johanna, with a thrill of surprise, recognised in the visitor the beautiful English woman she had seen in Florence, and Richard introduced them to each other. Mrs. Peveril, laden with gifts of flowers and fruit for the patients, approached Johanna smilingly, with every intention of kindly patronage; while Richard, flushed and uneasy, was led captive at her side. But Johanna was on her own ground, in a position of dignity and authority, and she received Mrs. Peveril with courteous, independent bearing as an equal.

'I am glad Mr. Dare accompanies you; I was afraid he might not be able to do so.

He is the best guide in his own wards, and can make the most prosaic details of hospital life interesting to you, I am sure.'

'Mrs. Peveril knows so much of hospitals, I don't think there is anything particular I can enlighten her about. But she was anxious to present her own gifts herself to a few of our worst cases. Sister Johanna, will you be good enough to take Mrs. Peveril to beds No. 4, 7, and 9, where grapes will be suitable for the patients, and flowers for No. 1, 8, 10, and 11?' and Richard spoke in his most professional tone.

'But you will come with us?' said Mrs. Peveril with an imperious air.

'No, I am sorry; but I shall be engaged with a patient at this end of the ward,' he replied, painfully conscious of Johanna's penetrating eyes, 'and you will be more welcome with the Sister than with me,' and Richard handed the basket of grapes to Johanna he had been carrying for Mrs. Peveril.

Nothing could be more gracious or charm-

ing than Mrs. Peveril's manner of distributing her gifts to the sad and weary occupants of the bed. She spoke sympathetic or cheerful words to each patient, as her quick intuition taught her what the case required, while her brilliant smile like sunshine was shed on all impartially. Johanna was accustomed to the visits of impulsive ladies, and they generally left her rather exhausted. But she felt no fatigue with Mrs. Peveril, who interested and attracted her, and she had a poignant suspicion that Richard and the beautiful young widow were something more than mere acquaintances.

When Mrs. Peveril had finished her gracious tour among the beds, with an air as though if she were not Royalty itself she was something superior to it, she addressed her attentions for a short time exclusively to Johanna, while Richard watched them from the opposite side of the ward.

'I want you to tell me about nursing, Sister Johanna,' she said; 'you can do that

better than the cleverest man alive. Men always forget the details that make up the picture, and deal in large and vague descriptions.'

The contrast between the two women as they stood facing each other was absolute. It would have been hard to determine which was the handsomer, the radiant woman with warm tints of hair and skin, enhanced by the absence of colour in her dress, and whose every movement was conscious, studied grace; or the stately grey-eyed, ivory-complexioned Sister in her quaint costume, neither fearing to displease nor seeking to conciliate. And their manner was in as striking contrast as their appearance. Where Mrs. Peveril laughed gaily, Johanna smiled delightfully; her voice was low and rich, Mrs. Peveril's high and clear, and might even upon occasion become shrill.

When they had ended their conversation in undertones, Mrs. Peveril said fervently:

'What a beautiful life yours must be!'

Johanna's smile said many things, for she was accustomed to impulsive ladies.

Then she replied: 'Beauty is the last element I find in my life here.'

'But I must say how it strikes an onlooker. I cannot imagine a more fascinating life than yours!' and Mrs. Peveril had made the same remark the day before to an artist, an actor, and a Roman Catholic priest.

After a gracious farewell, and promising soon to visit the hospital again, Mrs. Peveril and Richard left together, but not before Johanna had heard Richard say to her: 'May I lunch with you to-morrow instead of to-day? An unexpected engagement has cropped up for me.' She did not catch the reply, as a nurse came to her for orders at the moment, and she resolutely collected her thoughts to give her the necessary directions.

A sure instinct told Johanna that she had met her rival in the beautiful young widow, whose lovely face had suddenly become an object of terror to her. She could not

wonder at it: she had felt Mrs. Peveril's charm very keenly herself. 'I have my work to fall back upon,' she thought heroically, though the breath caught in her throat with a suppressed sob; 'what right had I to let my imagination go wandering away from my work?' and she no longer felt the slightest desire to paint Mrs. Peveril's portrait.

CHAPTER XXV

EVENTS IN THE OLD HOME

Her soul saw a glimpse of happiness through the chinks of her sickness-worn body.—FULLER.

WHILE Richard's life was full of congenial work and absorbing interest, so that he seldom gave a thought to the past, much of which he little dreamed had taken place in his early home. The mother he mourned as dead was still alive, though in a condition that made death seem preferable. His father, long since reclaimed from his drunken ways, still kept his foothold on the tight rope of teetotalism, balanced by spiritual pride, and love of applause from the brethren at Ebenezer Chapel; while little Reuben had grown into a handsome young fellow, immensely strong, and with an imperturbably good temper.

Unlike his elder brother he had not an aspiration that was unfulfilled in the career of a blacksmith. He thought his trade the best in the world, and took as much pride in turning out an honest piece of wrought-iron work, or in skilfully shoeing a difficult beast, as Richard did in performing a surgical operation.

The only trouble that overshadowed his cheerful spirits was the prolonged ill-health of his mother, who had been for some years past sinking into a complete invalid. She grew weaker and weaker, and suffered much pain with her habitual patience, but it grieved Reuben's kind heart to see it, and he would have been quite glad to hear her speak sometimes in the old querulous accents. She uttered no complaint, and would sit for hours together in the rocking-chair by the kitchen fire, her thin hands lying idle in her lap, too weak to knit or to sew. When her son looked in for a few minutes from the forge to see how she was getting on, his honest face shining

with good-humour and begrimed with smoke, her sad grey eyes lighted up with a smile. Then the young blacksmith drew the back of his hand across his mouth by way of preparation, and stooped to kiss his mother's pale cheek, where he left very visibly, Reuben Atherley his mark.

'How's the pain now, mother? Would you like me to fetch Mrs. Windybank? You must be dull enough with nobbut us menfolk to talk to,' and her stalwart son looked concerned.

'I am sure no gal could ha' been better to me than what you've been, Reuben, and though I thought a deal o' your eldest brother—mothers allays do o' their first b'ys—I doubt if 'e'd stayed at 'ome if 'e'd ha' been as comfortable like as you are. Mrs. Windybank's comin' to take 'er tea with me; she can't come afore then, she's busy bakin'.'

'All right, so long as I know you ain't alone too much,' and Reuben swung back to his work.

When Mrs. Windybank entered the Atherleys' kitchen it was obvious that she had suffered a domestic bereavement since we last saw her. She wore a black dress and a white cap, and her manner was cheerful and assured. Mrs. Windybank was a widow. She had nursed the deceased to his end with energy and good-will, buried him with honours, put herself and her family into deep mourning, and pronounced a eulogium upon him in these terms: 'There's a many women 'as' ad worse 'usbands than what Windybank's been to me, but I never was justly to call master in my own 'ouse, not till 'e was took.' This was Mrs. Windybank's opinion; the exact opposite was that of her children and neighbours.

'You're looking but very middling,' she said, as she regarded Mrs. Atherley with her head on one side, 'very middling indeed.'

'Aye, and I begin to think unless summat's done for me, and this place seed to,' and she laid her hand on her breast as she spoke, 'I shall never get no better, for nobody never

heard of a cancer going away of its own self, and I don't want to make no doctor's bills for Atherley.'

'Now, Mrs. Atherley,' said her friend in a menacing tone, 'you'll 'ave me angry just now if you talk i' that way! Think of sparing Atherley indeed! Let 'im pay for 'is own doings, I say! Isn't it all along of that blow I seed 'im give you with my own eyes the day as Richard run away? It was that as started this 'ere mischief in your breast. Talk o' sparing 'im, indeed!'

Mrs. Atherley's white face flushed.

'I know it, I know it, but 'e's never lifted a hand against me since; don't let's talk about it, Mrs. Windybank, it can't do no good. What I wanted to tell you is that Tom Christie's wife knows a woman as lives at Coventry, and she was a deal worse than what I am, she says, and she's been up to the Eastminster Hospital in London, and a very clever doctor there has taken the cancer right away and sent 'er 'ome cured.'

Mrs. Windybank pricked up her ears.

'Are you sure o' that?'

'Mrs. Christie read me out o' the woman's letter just what I've told you, and she wrote the doctor's name on a bit o' paper and put it under that pot image of the dancing girl on the mantelpiece, to keep it safe. If one can be cured, why not another, and why don't you go up to him yourself and try? she says,' and Mrs. Windybank lifted up the ornament her friend indicated, and walked to the window with the slip of paper she found beneath it. She read aloud:

'Mr. Dare! So that's 'is name, and I don't know but what you might do worse than go up to London, and ask this Mr. Dare at the hospital to do 'is best for you, but don't set your 'eart on no cures, I doubt you've been bad too long for that,' and Mrs. Windybank returned, shaking her head, to a seat near Mrs. Atherley.

'My heart's set on nothing, if it isn't the hopes of seeing my lad again, for nobody'll

make me believe as 'e's dead, not unless I saw 'im laid at my feet.'

'Now don't take on, Mrs. Atherley! If the Lord thinks fit to bring Richard 'ome again some fine day, why he will, and if he don't, why he won't, and it'll be no different to what it is now. You'll 'ave to go to London, that's plain.'

'What! Me as 'as never been twenty mile away from Dormington i' my life? However shall I do it!' and the poor creature looked about her helplessly.

'Why, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll take you to London myself! What's the good o' being your own master if you don't take a fling some times, and enj'y yourself!' and Mrs. Windybank, who had been for some minutes endeavouring to settle her cap to her own satisfaction, suddenly gave it up as a vain attempt, took it off and laid it on the table, saying as she did so, 'Mrs. Atherley, if ever you're a widder, don't wear a cap, it 'eats the 'ead and wears the 'air!'

'You don't really mean as you'd go to London with me, do you?' asked Mrs. Atherley eagerly, entirely disregarding her friend's well-meant admonition.

'Why not, I should like to know? If Susan at two-and-twenty 'ears old can't mind the shop for a couple o' days, I'll let her know when I come 'ome again, and 'er brother Jack'll keep 'er company when 'is work's over of an evening. It'll be a regular pleasure trip for me, for I shall visit my cousin Pratt, and if we can do you good as well it'll be pleasure all round,' and Mrs. Windybank put on her cap again over a knob of grey hair the size of a walnut, and began to ask practical questions.

'How are you to get a note for the hospital?'

'Mrs. Christie says the lady her Jane lives with in London 'ud give me one cheerful and willing, and I'll ask her to write to-night for it—I mean if Atherley 'll let me,' and the hope kindled in the poor woman's

heart sank low when she thought of her husband.

'You leave that to me, Mrs. Atherley,' said the widow Windybank sharply. 'I shall just tell him straight out as I'm going to take you up to London to the hospital, and leave you there for a fortnight or three weeks, and he must pay money down for your fare.'

'Oh, that he'll never do, don't you think it!'

Mrs. Windybank laughed a short derisive laugh.

'Atherley 'asn't forgot that time as I kep' 'ouse for 'im! If he makes any bones about your going away wi' me, I shall tell 'im, "Very well then, I'll come and nurse your wife 'ere instead," and you see, 'e'll give me the money sharp enough, and ask me to fix the day!'

And Mrs. Windybank was quite right. When first she told the blacksmith she was going to take his wife to London, to be operated upon at the Eastminster Hospital, and asked him for a couple of pounds for her

railway fare and other expenses, he said he hadn't as much money in the world. But when she mentioned the alternative plan, he rushed upstairs at once to the bedroom, and returned in an incredibly short time with a couple of sovereigns, which he pressed into her hand, assuring her there wasn't a day to be lost, and the sooner they were off the better.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LIVING DEAD

O l'amour d'une mère ! amour que nul n'oublie !
Pain merveilleux, que Dieu partage et multiplie !
Table toujours servie au paternel foyer !
Chacun en a sa part, et tous l'ont tout entier !

VICTOR HUGO.

RICHARD DARE, accompanied by the house surgeon and a band of medical students, entered the ward while the clock was striking the appointed hour, and a very visible access of devotion to duty was perceptible in the nurses as their footsteps were heard approaching. He cast keen glances to right and left, detecting in an instant the fresh faces among the occupants of the beds on either side of the long narrow room.

Sister Johanna had told Richard briefly, before he made his morning round, of an

urgent case brought in to the hospital on the previous day. The patient was an elderly woman come up from the country in the hope of being successfully operated upon by Mr. Dare, whose fame had penetrated to her distant home. The poor creature's simple faith in the power of the great surgeon to cure her touched Sister Johanna, and led her to speak a kindly word on her behalf.

Several important cases claimed Mr. Dare's attention before he approached the bed-side of the new patient, who lay nervously watching his gradual progress through the ward, surrounded and accompanied by a group of eager students. She supposed the tall gentleman with curly grey hair, wearing a frock coat and holding in his hand a queer instrument like a little trumpet, must be the famous Mr. Dare, for the young men were listening attentively to every word he said, and some evidently thought his remarks so precious they were writing them down in little books to take away with them. It was a moment

of deep and solemn excitement to Mrs. Atherley, and her lips were moving in silent prayer. In another minute she would be face to face with the one human being who held the keys of life and death for her, and he would pronounce her sentence. Oh! might it be life, if only a maimed and suffering life, for while she lived there was always the hope that she might see her dear lost child once more!

But powerful as Mrs. Atherley's emotion was, it was slight to what Richard felt when he stood by her bed, and in spite of the havoc wrought by time and disease, recognised in the new patient his own mother, whom for ten years he had believed to be dead. There was no doubt of it, he could not be mistaken. Even before she spoke, and he heard again the gentle familiar tones, it was his mother and no one else in all the world. Whoever the Elizabeth Atherley might be the announcement of whose death in the Dormington newspaper he had taken for his

mother's, she was not the Elizabeth Atherley who bore him, nursed him at her breast, and carried him in her arms, for she was before him now, given back to him as though she had been raised from the dead. Richard's heart gave a great bound, and he expected that she would know her son as surely and instantly as he had known his mother, but the soft grey eyes met his without recognition. She simply looked with awe and interest on the great surgeon who, if God willed it, should prolong her life. How should the poor woman discover her lost son in the dignified gentleman, speaking educated colourless English without a trace of his county's accent, with the unformed boyish features matured and settled into a mould with which she was unfamiliar, and his dark hair turned grey? To his mother Richard was still a lad of sixteen, the blacksmith's boy, with bare muscular arms, smooth face and chaotic features, speaking the forcible uncultivated English she spoke herself.

A faint flush dyed her pale face in the presence of the doctor whose fame had penetrated to Dormington, and brought the timid home-keeping woman forth on a venturesome journey in quest of healing at his hands, or of the blessing of death.

Richard's eyes grew dim, and he cleared his throat as though he found it difficult to speak. Sister Johanna stood beside him, and the students clustered round him anxious to hear what Mr. Dare would have to say on the new case.

'When did the patient come into the hospital?' he asked Johanna in a voice that was scarcely audible, speaking because he felt the tension of silence becoming unendurable.

'She is the patient I mentioned to you, that came here yesterday after a long journey from the Midland counties. Her name is Elizabeth Atherley. She has never been so far from home before, but a neighbour told her of a successful operation of yours, and nothing would do but she must come to you,' and

Sister Johanna arranged the poor woman's pillow for her as she spoke.

Richard turned towards the patient, avoiding her eyes and nervously playing with the stethoscope in his hand.

'I am afraid you are very much tired with your journey,' he said gently, to give himself time to recover his self-possession. Then he felt her pulse, vaguely counting its strokes without knowing whether it beat fast or slow, while his own hammered a hundred and twenty to the minute.

The mild grey eyes that had been the light of his childhood were fixed on him in quiet confidence.

'No, sir, I don't feel so bad as I did before me and Mrs. Windybank set out together, for I'd no rest day nor night till I could come to you, for I'm sure you'll cure me if I am to be cured. It's a cancer in the breast as I want you to remove, sir, and then I shall go home and get better, please God! I've come more than a' 'underd mile to see you, sir.'

'That is a long way for you to travel. Have you no doctor in Dor—where you live, who could have operated for you, and saved you the trouble of coming to London?'

'Yes, sir, we've doctors i' Dormington, but I've no faith in them like. I've come to you because you operated on a woman that was a deal worse than what I am, and you cured her, and if you can do the same for me as you did for her, please God I shall live for many 'ears yet.'

'You have a family perhaps, and you want to regain your health for their sake?' and now that there seemed no likelihood of his mother recognising him, Richard nerved himself to look full into the dear familiar eyes.

'I've a husband, and a son at 'ome, sir, but I've two sons rightly, and it's to see my eldest son again as I want so much to live; I don't know as there's anything else besides that as I care for. My eldest lad he run away from home, when he was sixteen 'ear old, and for four 'ears after he sent me money regular to show me as he was alive, but never no letters. It's

ten 'ears now since he sent me anything, but I can't think as he's dead for all that, and it's not the money as I'm missing, for a sight of his face 'ud be worth all the money in the world to me. He's sent me nothing because he's so bad off 'imself, sir, that's what it is. He'll come back yet, and it 'ud break 'is heart if 'is mother was dead when he come home. He didn't think much of me p'raps, when he was at home, but 'e's been long enough in the world to learn as there's no love like a mother's love. I want to see my boy again, and if this cancer was gone, I think I could live on in'opes of seeing 'im once more,' and as she spoke, the tender grey eyes unconsciously looked on the face she longed to see, and knew it not.

'Have you no daughter?' asked Richard, in a thick strange voice unlike his own.

'I had a little gel, sir, but she died when she was five 'ear old. My son as is at 'ome is all that's left to me now,' and Richard knew that the torn fragment of newspaper he had

chanced upon, containing what he believed to be the notice of his mother's death, was in reality his little sister Elizabeth's, though in his time they had called her by the pretty sexless name of Baby. And for ten years he had lived in the belief that his mother was dead.

'Sister, will you remove the shawl from her shoulders?' he said, turning towards Johanna.

With quick light fingers Johanna took off the shawl, unfastened the night-dress and laid bare to view a terrible sight. Mrs. Atherley's face flushed, and she made a little unavailing attempt to cover her bosom. 'Must these young gentlemen see it, too?' she asked piteously.

Johanna laid a compassionate hand on her shoulder.

'Try not to mind them. It is for the sake of other sufferers that they must see and learn all they can,' and the poor woman bowed her head submissively. But when Richard saw the breast that fed him and

pillowed his infant head, laid bare before him devoured by malignant disease, he drew his breath with a hissing sound, and his face grew white and set.

'Cover it up, Sister.' Then turning to the students, 'You do not need to see this poor woman's breast, gentlemen. You have frequently seen cases as severe as this, and you will be present at the operation, when it is removed. You are aware that there is a great difference in the nervous organisation of patients, and here we shall be doing positive harm if we remain by the bed-side. I shall be obliged if you will pass on to the next ward, and I will soon follow you,' and the astonished youths trooped away as they were bidden, with a sound of many feet on the polished floor.

As soon as the door had closed behind them Richard seated himself on the locker by the bed, for his knees shook under him. The house surgeon and Sister Johanna remained with him.

The dear familiar grey eyes rested gratefully upon him.

'Thank you, sir! Those young gentlemen mean it all for the best, but they stare the same as if they was looking in a shop window. Oh, sir, can't you help me? can't you cut this cancer away?'

'It shall be removed without loss of time; I only wish you had come here long ago. But I had rather not operate. Mr. Ashe, the house surgeon here, will do it, and you will be quite safe in his hands.'

'Oh, but, sir, I've come all this way to ask you to operate yourself! It's your name that's brought me further than I've ever been in my life before.' Then looking ruefully at the house surgeon, 'I hope the gentleman won't be offended, for I'm sure he must be very clever if he works along with you; but I'm a sick woman, and sick folks have their fancies, and mine is that no one can take this cancer away as well as you, sir,' and the struggle between Mrs. Atherley's politeness

and her desire to have Mr. Dare for her doctor was pathetic to see.

'I hope you will do as this poor woman wishes,' said the house surgeon in a low voice, for he was by no means desirous of undertaking so serious an operation when he might have the advantage of seeing it performed by one of the first surgeons of the day. 'It would be of the greatest service to me to see your method with it.'

Richard made no reply, but instead turned to ask the patient a question.

'Have you any reason to suppose that this cancer is the result of an accident of any kind?' he said very deliberately.

'An accident, sir?' she repeated, and looked perplexed.

'Yes. Have you ever fallen upon anything, for instance—or had a blow on the breast?'

The pale face flushed painfully. After a short silence she said quietly, 'Yes, sir, I had a blow the day after my eldest lad ran away.'

'You mean that some one struck you?' and Richard's brow contracted with a frown.

'Yes, sir.'

'Was it your husband that struck you?' he asked in hard, incisive tones.

'Oh, sir, must I answer you? He's never done it since, and but for the drink 'e wouldn't have done it then; but you see he'd provocation like, for he thought as I'd helped the lad to run away, and thinking that bad o' me he forgot as you can't knock a woman about same as he'd used to do the lad, and he acted rash and impatient. I can't deny as this mischief begun after that, but it was very slow for a many 'ears.'

'And your breast bore the blow that should have fallen on your son's head! You poor woman!'

And Sister Johanna and the house surgeon looked in amazement at Mr. Dare, a moment ago so stern, now speaking in a voice that was choked with feeling. They constantly had cases to deal with as sad as this

poor creature's, but they had never before seen him unduly affected by them, and they were at a loss to understand him now. Richard yearned to make himself known to the mother who had been dead to him so long, to put his arms about her and kiss the poor worn face; his heart was big with the indestructible love there is between mother and child.

But he could not reveal himself to her in the public ward of a hospital, nor for her sake dare he cause her any strong excitement before she underwent the operation. When that was well over, and he judged it safe to tell her that her own lost son Richard was the surgeon she had come so far to see, then he believed the joyful shock would act beneficially, and help forward her recovery. He must not think of her now as anything nearer to him than a patient, lest he should imperil the life he prayed God his skill might be effectual to preserve.

So thinking within himself he spoke in

gentle measured tones. He stood by the bed side looking at the patient with tender compassion. 'If you so particularly wish it, then, I will operate. At noon to-morrow we will remove your tormentor, and you need not be the least afraid in looking forward to it, for we shall give you chloroform, and you will know nothing about the operation till it is all safely over. Can you trust yourself to me?' and he held out his hand, which she clasped in both her feverish hands.

'Aye, sir, I trust you same as I trust God, and if it's His will as I should die under the knife, you'll have no call to blame yourself; you'll 'ave done the best for me, I'm sure, and you'd let 'em know at home. You couldn't be kinder to me, sir, not if I was your own mother!' and the poor soul looked up in his face with touching confidence.

Richard could bear it no longer. He drew out his watch and looked at the dial, where he saw only a misty circle of figures. With a strong effort he controlled himself.

'I have other patients waiting for me; I must go now. Good-bye till to-morrow, then I shall do my best for you, never fear! Sister Johanna, shall I find you in your sitting-room when I have gone my round?' and Mr. Dare and the house surgeon followed the students into the next ward.

Never had the great surgeon's clinical lectures been of so little value as they were that morning. The more able of the students, who could estimate the help it was to them to go the rounds of the wards with Mr. Dare, were astonished at the poverty and barrenness of his discourse. He passed by obscure cases, such as he loved to make clear to the least intelligent of his hearers by his lucid explanations, and uttered merely a few commonplace nothings. His usual keen insight seemed to have deserted him, and he appeared unable to throw light on any matter, great or small. Something had gone wrong with old Dare at that country woman's bedside, the students agreed, and judging by the

effect, she might have been a witch casting a spell on him that robbed him of memory and observation. 'Never saw anything so rum,' was the general opinion, and the tour of the wards being completed in that unsatisfactory fashion, the young men rushed helter-skelter down the echoing stone staircase to the open air, with all the alacrity of boys escaping from school.

When Richard entered Johanna's little sitting-room, where it was his habit to see her when he wished to speak with her on professional matters, she was shocked at his appearance. His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes dark with the shadow of unshed tears. She involuntarily drew near him and laid her hand on his arm. 'You are ill, Richard,' she said.

Richard had not meant to tell her of his strange discovery then, yet how else could he explain the tender interest he took in the new patient unless he discovered his real motive? But his need of sympathy was

greater than he knew, and at the sound of her voice his tongue was loosed, and fixing sorrowful eyes on her he said :

'Johanna, that poor woman, whose breast I am to remove to-morrow, is my mother.'

'Your mother! Oh, Richard!'

'Yes, my mother! You know that I left home to get away from my father, and I might have added that I was coward enough to leave my mother to bear the life I had not the patience to face. I have not been near my home since I was a lad of sixteen, and for ten years I have believed that my mother was dead. But it was the announcement of my little sister's death, and not hers, that I accidentally saw on a scrap of newspaper, with the age torn off, and nothing but the name Elizabeth Atherley left. I knew her the instant our eyes met, even before she spoke, but I dared not betray myself for her sake. You heard her say that she was sure her son was alive! Oh, Johanna, she must live, if human skill and prayer to God can avail!'

Johanna was utterly confounded. 'But that poor woman's name is Atherley, and yours is Dare!' she said wondering.

'Atherley is my name by birth, but I took the name of Dare and made it mine, when I began my new life. I was not ashamed of my name, but I adopted a fresh one to hide myself from my family, till I had risen to a position they might be proud of—that was my boyish idea—and when I thought my mother was dead, I did not care to make myself known to any one at home.'

Again Johanna with quiet persistency, 'But are you sure that this woman is your mother, notwithstanding that her name is Elizabeth Atherley? If she is your mother, how is it that she does not recognise her son in you?' for Johanna could not at once accept the astounding idea, even on Richard's assertion.

He replied in tones of calm conviction.

'I am absolutely sure that she is my mother, how sure you may judge from the fact

that though I have believed her to be dead these ten years, it did not prevent me from instantly recognising her. But it is not extraordinary that she should not know me, though she believes that I am still alive. Remember, I was only a lad of sixteen when she last saw me, rude, rough and bare-armed, working in my father's forge, as unlike the grey-haired, frock-coated doctor as it is possible to conceive. My very speech is so changed by education, I scarcely speak the same language that I did when I was at home. While my mother is only changed by fourteen years more wear and tear of life, and by her illness —it is my mother beyond all doubt,' and he bit his under lip hard.

'Oh, Richard, if it is your mother, how can you bear to operate? how can you do it?'

His face grew rigid. 'I can bear it because she wishes me to do it; I can make myself do it! The case is so dangerous I must not thwart her in anything. She may die in my hands; but if she lives, then I shall

tell her that her son has done all that lies in his power to atone for—Oh, Johanna, you heard what she said about the blow she received! It should have fallen on my thick skull and not on her tender breast!' and Richard covered his face with his hands.

'Can I do anything to make it less terrible for you to-morrow?' she asked softly.

'You can do much, both for her and for me, more than any one else. I don't want my mother to be troubled by the sight of the students in the theatre; she must have chloroform before she is taken there, and be carried in unconscious ready for the operation. Will you give her chloroform?—she seems to feel at home with you. It will be less formidable for her than if Mr. Ashe administered it, though, of course, he continues it during the operation. You do not object?' and Richard looked beseechingly at her.

'How could I object?'

'One thing more. Will you arrange for her to have a private room for a fortnight or three

weeks after the operation? I shall want to have her to myself for that short time, and I dread the publicity, the gossip in the hospital, when it leaks out who she is, as it assuredly will do somehow or another. Oh, Johanna, I could scarcely keep myself from throwing my arms round my mother's neck! It is the greatest relief to have spoken to you about it; there is no one but you that I can turn to in a moment like this!' and he grasped her hand warmly.

'Richard! you are trembling, this will never do! You will need all your strength and self-control to-morrow!' and she withdrew her hand from his.

'Yes; my mother's life will depend on the steadiness of my hand, on the absolute control of every nerve and muscle,' and he held out his right hand by a strong effort, suppressing the tremor that agitated his whole frame.

'Feel my hand now, Johanna; it is steady enough for anything!' he said, with a strong man's pride in his self-mastery.

'Yes, that hand is steady enough to hold the keys of life and death,' she said, lightly touching it as she spoke. 'You will be successful to-morrow! I cannot think that you and your poor mother have been so strangely brought together, if it were not for her relief in her necessity. Should you call it superstition that makes me sure of this, Richard?'

Richard had taken up his hat and was about to go, but he paused with his hand on the door.

'Superstition, Johanna? It is faith in God who has led my mother to me by ways beyond our devising, at the moment when my skill is equal to her need. To-morrow, at a quarter to twelve, remember!'

'I will not fail you in a single thing!' she replied, and Richard was gone.

Was there indeed no one nearer to him than herself, to whom he could turn for sympathy when his heart was stirred to its depths? In what relation, then, did Mrs.

Peveril stand to him that he did not go to her either of right or of necessity, in his joy and sorrow? It was a mystery to Johanna, and the conviction stamped itself upon her mind that Richard and Mrs. Peveril could not be to each other all that she had supposed, or he would not have said there was no one but herself to whom he could turn at such a moment of profound emotion.

CHAPTER XXVII

MOTHER AND SON

Yet hath my night of life some memory,
My wasting lamps some fading glimmer left,
My dull deaf ears a little use to hear:
All these old witnesses (I cannot err)
Tell me, thou art my son.—*Comedy of Errors.*

It was a theory of Richard Dare's that a man whose business it is to heal the diseased, or to soothe the deranged nerves of the sick, should have no nerves of his own. But experience has a way of knocking on the head theories, however carefully reasoned and tenaciously held. For, after the tremendous shock of recognising in the hospital his mother whom he believed to be dead, and promising to operate on her the following morning, Richard discovered that he possessed as many nerves as any of his patients, and in as irritable a

state of sensibility. He believed he had forgotten how to shed tears, though he remembered some childish cause of them, which certainly would not affect him now. But what he had seen and heard in the ward that day simply broke him down, and as soon as he could be by himself in his own room he wept himself exhausted. When a strong self-controlled man weeps, it is a flood that bears down all before it and leaves him weak and tender as a child.

Richard's great fear was lest the violent emotion he had been powerless to suppress should affect his skill on the morrow, when his mother's life would depend on his unswerving steadiness of hand. He had never before known what it was to be nervous in anticipation of an important operation. Often beforehand he had been intensely high-strung, but only to a point that strengthened his confidence and increased his powers, acting alike beneficially on his patient and himself. But his present excitement was of a far dif-

ferent kind, menacing both his patient's safety and his own reputation as an operator.

It might be his destiny, in removing the breast that had fed him, to deal death to her who had given him life. If his mother's heart had not been set on his operating, nothing under heaven would have induced him to undertake the terrible task.

It was well for Richard that he had several patients to see that evening, and one or two of them cases of sufficient gravity to occupy his mind to the exclusion of every other thought. But when at length the day was over and he lay sleepless in the sultry summer night, the horror of failure on the morrow, the dread lest his right hand should forget its cunning, when it was needed as it never was needed before, fell upon him and overwhelmed him. He resolved that if his mother died under the operation, he would follow her into the next world as soon as the swiftest poison could take him thither. Thinking over all that she had told him, he

regarded himself as unintentionally the chief cause of her suffering in mind and body. To-morrow offered him the chance of expiation by removing her terrible disease. But it was only a chance. The mischief had been allowed so long to develop unchecked, that the latest moment had arrived in which an operation could be attempted with any hope of prolonging life. Under the most favourable circumstances it could only be a brief respite. But if, from the slightest tremor of his hand, he cut one hair's-breadth deeper than he intended, it would be death, inevitable death to his mother. And cold drops of terror broke forth on his brow at the thought.

Richard could bear it no longer. He rose and dressed, and opening a small locked cabinet, took from it a dark glass bottle, and pouring a few drops of deadly poison from it into a small phial, put it in his pocket. He then drew aside the curtain, extinguished the candles, and let in the cold, disillusioning light of day. He stood at the window breath-

ing the unsullied freshness of early morning, watching the grey sky above the blackened houses kindle and glow with the flush of dawn. Where should he be by to-morrow's daybreak? If he were successful and his mother still lived, he would be the most thankful soul alive, but if he had failed, and she had died under his hand, then he, too, would die, and never more have part or lot in anything beneath the sun. He raised his right hand to heaven, and besought God, who had endowed it with life-saving skill, not to withdraw it now.

Johanna carried out Richard's instructions for his mother's comfort to the letter, and had her removed at once into a small room near her own, where she could satisfy herself that she wanted nothing. Early on the following morning she stood by her bedside to ask her how she had slept.

'Oh, Sister, I've had a beautiful night! I've slept like a child, and such dreams! I dreamed as Mr. Dare had cured me, and I was

quite well again, and 'e said, "There's only one thing more as you want now, and that's to see your son Richard!" and I said, "Can you tell me where 'e is, sir?" and 'e said, "I can tell you where he is this very minute;" and I was that joyful I woke with the start of it!'

'That was a very happy dream, and some dreams come true,' said Johanna smiling.

'God grant as it may. It come o' Mr. Dare being such a comfortable gentleman like. Betwixt 'im and the Almighty, I've no fears this day, none at all;' and the poor woman looked up with quiet confidence.

'I am glad to hear you speak in this way, for it will help your recovery more than anything else,' said Johanna warmly; and she began to hope, and almost believe, that the operation would be successful.

Johanna was full of sympathy with Richard in the ordeal that lay before him, and she could only marvel at his iron self-control when he entered the hospital. She knew nothing

of the struggle through which he had passed. She saw only the victorious result, evidenced by calm and complete self-possession, but his pallor was frightful, and his eyes glowed like flame. He did not, contrary to his usual custom, speak to her for a few minutes in her sitting-room before he went into the operating theatre.

'The patient all right?' he said briefly as they stood in the corridor.

'Yes, she has had a very good night, and is ready for what lies before her. Would you like to see her now?' she suggested.

'Decidedly not, unless she wants to see me.'

'She does not even know that you are in the hospital yet.'

'Then for God's sake say nothing to her about it! I am ready for what I have to do, but for nothing beyond. I shall be in the theatre at twelve, and you and Ashe will bring her in ready for the operation.'

The theatre was a large bare-looking room

lighted from above by a skylight, with semicircular benches rising tier above tier almost to the ceiling, affording space for a hundred spectators who one and all had an uninterrupted view of the operating table, standing in the middle of the room under the strong glare of a June day. Half an hour before the time appointed, the folding-doors were burst open by a hilarious band of medical students, who took the gallery by storm, leaping and striding over the benches, as eager to secure good seats as though they were about to witness a thrilling play. A little later the strangers and visitors arrived, consisting of surgeons come to take a lesson in their own craft, and unprofessional friends of the students, who, penetrated with lay curiosity, were there drawn by the magnet of Mr. Dare's name, or simply to see an operation for an operation's sake. But from whatever motive, from his own point of view everyone expected to be well entertained, and the young men were pleasantly excited by the pro-

gramme of the morning. First, there was to be the excision of a breast by Mr. Dare, a touch-and-go operation they understood, and one well worth seeing. That was to be followed by the amputation of a leg at the thigh, to be performed by the house surgeon, and the spectators settled themselves comfortably in their seats, and looked up at the clock over the door.

A quarter to twelve. Something must be done to pass the time, and the younger and more irrepressible students threw paper darts at each other's eyes and noses, and the whole gallery hummed and buzzed with laughter and talk.

The house surgeon stepped quietly to and fro, setting everything in order for the coming operation. A table was placed for the operating surgeon, his case of instruments laid open upon it, together with a bowl containing a strong antiseptic mixture, sponges, lint, and rolls of linen bandaging. At the sight of these preparations the students ceased their

childish play, and their voices sank to an excited murmur.

At five minutes to twelve Mr. Dare entered the theatre in silence so profound you might have thought every noisy youth in the gallery was struck dumb. His face was white and rigid, and he looked keenly about him, to see that all was in readiness. He gave a short nod of approval, and the dressers retired to fetch the patient, while he swiftly arranged his instruments in the order in which he should require to use them.

It was Sister Johanna's task to be with her patients in the theatre, and remain with them during the operation to wait upon the operating surgeon. It was a duty she had undertaken with loathing, but as her presence was a comfort to the patient, and Richard found her the most useful and tactful of nurses, she had schooled herself to go through the ordeal with apparent indifference. Sometimes she had been present at sights so ghastly that medical students had fainted and turned

sick, but Sister Johanna had never faltered, and was praised for her nerve and fortitude. She laughed to herself to think that her calmness had nothing to do with these qualities, for though she had been present at numberless operations, she had never seen one. She kept her eyes resolutely fixed on her work, handing sponges to the surgeon and taking them from him, without once looking to see to what use they were applied. If she had been asked to describe how any of the operations she daily attended were performed, she could have told you no more about it than the patient himself roused from his chloroform stupor. Precisely at twelve o'clock a sound of approaching footsteps was heard, and the folding-doors of the theatre were thrown open. Sister Johanna and the house surgeon entered, walking one on either side of the stretcher on which the patient lay insensible, a breathing image of death. The dressers placed the stretcher with its ghastly burden on the operating table, where the strong yellow light streamed down

on the nerveless form and deadly upturned face.

If Richard had seen the unconscious face with its expression of mute appeal, even then he would have broken down; but he averted his eyes, while he motioned to Johanna to remove the covering from the patient's breast. As she did so, with quick light touch the house surgeon again administered chloroform, and examined the patient's eye, in readiness to exhibit more the instant he detected the least sign of returning consciousness. Then the operation began in silence, broken only by the stertorous breathing of the patient.

Never had the great surgeon operated so brilliantly. A hundred eyes were riveted on the movements of his strong, unfaltering hand, in amazement and admiration of the consummate skill with which he overcame the terrible difficulties of the case. The tension of the onlookers became supreme. The students leaned forward on the benches in breathless suspense, and many stood up in silent excite-

ment, without knowing that they had risen to their feet. Faces grew pale and teeth were clenched, but not a sound was heard. Once only Johanna glanced at Richard's face, but it was so dreadful she could not look again.

At length it was over. A gasp of relief was heard from the crowded benches, and, drawing a deep shuddering breath, Richard, still speechless, motioned to the house surgeon to dress the wound; he could do nothing further. Great drops of sweat stood on his brow, and he shook like a man in an ague fit.

The loud and stertorous breathing of the patient was now quieter, the effect of the anæsthetic was wearing off, and she would soon recover consciousness. Just as the house surgeon finished his task, Richard summoned up courage to look in his mother's face, while with his trembling fingers he felt her pulse, and observed the effect of the chloroform passing away quickly and naturally. He sponged her brow with eau de Cologne, her lips quivered,

and the dear familiar eyes slowly opened and looked into his through the fading mist of the anæsthetic with a far-away, insensate gaze. Gradually light and life returned to them with a bewildered, questioning gaze, and Richard gently passed his hand over them and closed them. But they opened again, fixed on his with an intensity that made him tremble. Suddenly the clear light of recovered consciousness, of love and fullest recognition, irradiated her face with divine tenderness. She looked at him with her whole soul in her eyes, and murmured ecstatically, 'Richard, my son Richard!' and Mr. Dare, the great surgeon, the man of iron nerve, fell by her side in a dead faint!

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FRACTIOUS INVALID

He has put on the strong armour of sickness; he is wrapped in the callous hide of suffering; he keeps his sympathy, like some curious vintage, under trusty lock and key, for his own use only.—CHARLES LAMB.

While you are opening your colloquial pack
The fiend Lumbago jumps upon his back.

O. W. HOLMES.

THE day after Mrs. Atherley left home for the hospital a deep gloom settled down upon her husband, which was not caused by her absence and the uncertainty of her return; nor was it due to sympathy with her suffering, nor anxiety as to the result of the operation she was about to undergo. Atherley's depression was entirely unconnected with the sorrows of anyone else in the wide world but himself, and owed its origin solely to the circumstance that he was suddenly

attacked with severe lumbago. The blacksmith had never known what it was to be ill in his life before. He was filled with terror, amazement, and helpless wrath, to find himself nailed to his bed by invisible spikes of pain, and he naturally thought that the most valuable existence in the universe was imperilled. He raged and fumed and vented his feelings in groans as full of anger and impatience as of pain, and told the lumbago plainly what he thought of it in pre-reformation language, such as had not passed his lips for many a year. He struggled against his illness with the insensate rebellion of a bull taken in a net, the chosen type of brute strength and unchastened will.

In his helplessness and wrath Atherley missed his wife more than he would have cared to admit. There was no one to wait on him in his enforced captivity, and to be duly scolded for doing her best. And to hire a nurse meant paying wages, or if a neighbour came to help him he would have

to be civil to her, and either alternative would go sadly against the grain. Reuben could not spare much time to attend to his father, for the best of good reasons, because while he was disabled he had to do double duty in the smithy by day, and in the evening he 'walked,' as it is called in ghostly phrase, with 'Liza Windybank, whom he courted energetically and successfully in his leisure hours.

The June days were long and hot, and the blacksmith found it melancholy and irritating lying in bed hour after hour, wincing and starting with pain, while the bright sunshine poured in at the open window, and the voices of children at play, the sound of passing footsteps, and the noise of the street traffic, told him that the world was going on very well without him, as if he were already dead and buried. And it aggravated him to think that but for this wretched attack he was to have preached at Ebenezer Chapel that very evening, and held the

prayer-meeting afterwards, which now Tom Christie would do instead, and have it all his own way. 'But he ain't got my gift in prayer, that's certain, nowhere near it, he ain't, for all he thinks so much of hisself!' and the irritable sufferer gave an impatient jerk as he lay, that rung forth a groan of unalloyed pain.

The blacksmith was very angry with the folks at Ebenezer Chapel. Here he had lain two whole days, and they had offered up no prayers for the recovery of brother Atherley, and none of them had been to inquire after him except old Mr. Tuppin, the Chapel-keeper, and Tom Christie, who had looked in for a minute to say that he would take the preaching and the prayer-meeting, without seeming at all impressed by the gravity of his friend's illness. In fact, he had remarked, in what Atherley felt to be a singularly heartless manner, 'Oh, you'll be all right again directly! Your complaint's like a flash o' lightning, as the saying is, comes of a

sudden, and it's gone again afore you can turn round!'

'Aye, it'll have to be gone afore I can turn round!' and the wretched man lying flat on his back made a futile effort to change his position, to a muttered accompaniment of words, sounding strangely like the language of his unregenerate days.

Christie's brief and unsympathetic visit was soon over, and the blacksmith was once more alone. He puffed and groaned as he watched the sunbeams creep along the wall, and wondered whether Reuben would be in to light the candle before the room grew dark, when he heard a shuffling foot-step on the stairs, the door opened slowly, and in came old Mr. Tuppin, the Chapel-keeper, to ask Mr. Atherley how he was to-day.

'Sinkin', sinkin' rapid!' replied the invalid in a loud angry voice. 'Two w'ole days 'ave I laid here, and not a prayer put up for me at the Chapel, nor nothing, and me

a leading friend too! Not a soul's been a-nigh me but you and Tom Christie, to say as he was going to take my duty to-night, according to his ability. I doubt he'll 'ave but a poor congregation!'

'We didn't know how bad you was, Mr. Atherley,' said the old man, taking a chair by the bedside. 'I heard as it was only the lumbago.'

'Only the lumbago!' roared the afflicted one. 'What the devil do you want more! A man can't be more than killed, can he?'

Mr. Tuppin was shocked, for he had never seen brother Atherley laid on a bed of sickness before, and his remarks were not to edification.

'Why, Mr. Atherley, there's worse things than lumbago: only think o' your poor wife wi' a cancer!'

Atherley frowned impatiently. 'I tell you a cancer's a thing as you can cut out and ha' done with! It's same as you scoop out a bruised bit of a' apple and leave the rest on it

sound, but the knife can't do nothing for the lumbago. They'll cure my wife safe enough, but all the doctors in London couldn't cure my complaint; there's nothing for 'em to ketch 'old of like; there's nothing to show and make a fuss about; that's why it's such a 'opeless case!'

Mr. Tuppin looked exceedingly perplexed. 'Well, all as I know is once when I had the lumbago very bad, a bottle o' something as I had from the chemist's took it right away all of a sudden.'

Atherley looked at him with scorn. 'Your lumbago! I dessay! You wasn't skewered to your bed like a cockchafer on a pin, wi' red hot wires o' pain drove through your back. I dessay as something from the chemist's did take away all the lumbago as you ever had, but mine's a different sort, and I make but little doubt as it'll end fatal!'

'Oh dear, I 'ope not, Mr. Atherley!' said the old man with kindly concern. 'Hadn't I better go round to Mr. Jukes to ask 'im to

'ave prayer put up i' the Chapel for your recovery?'

'I won't 'ave 'em asked to do nothing of the kind!' replied the invalid testily. 'They'd ought to ha' thought on it theirselves! When a Prince in Israel's struck down wi' sickness the people 'adn't ought to need asking; they should crowd into the Chapel by 'underds to pray that 'is valywable life may be spared. But I'll let 'em know what I think of it, if the Lord raises me up again!'

'Shall I fetch Mr. Jukes to pray with you?' asked Mr. Tuppin, who was not at all satisfied with brother Atherley's spiritual state.

'No, he's as bad as the rest o' them; he'd ought to ha' come without being sent for; it's 'is place to wait of me. I consider as the folks at the Chapel 'ave used me very bad. I'm offended with 'em, I am, and I've a good mind when I get better to turn infidel to spite 'em; they'd never carry on without me!' and having uttered this terrible threat, Atherley

fixed an angry eye on Mr. Tuppin to see how he stood the shock. Apparently he bore it well, for he merely said, 'You'll do as you choose about that, Mr. Atherley, of course, but it 'ud only be 'urting yourself.'

The following afternoon when Mr. Tuppin called again to see how Atherley was going on, to his amazement he found the patient downstairs, fractious and convalescent. He was seated at the kitchen table with pen and ink before him, dressed in his Sunday suit of shining black, as befitted the solemn occasion of recovery from severe illness.

'Why, Mr. Atherley, how you do surprise me, to be sure! Who would ha' thought o' seeing you out o' your bed, leave alone being downstairs and dressed! If we wasn't quick enough at the Chapel praying for you when you was ill, we won't be be'ind 'and in having a thanksgiving for your recovery!' and the old man seated himself and nodded pleasantly in Atherley's direction.

'There ain't no call to give thanks for

nothing!' said the convalescent one testily, 'I done it all myself! I thought as I'd get Reuben to 'eave me over in bed, for he hadn't the sense to think of it for hisself, and he rubbed me wi' turpentine till 'is hand and my skin nearly broke out i' flames wi' the friction, and the pain got easier, and by morning I found as I could turn myself and presently I was able to get up; but I can't do no work to-day. But I'm passing the time composing a sermon as 'll be summat out of the common, I can tell you, when I come to preach it!'

'If I might make so bold as ask, what's it about, Mr. Atherley? You'll be for teaching us about chastenings, and visitations, and afflictions, and how they should be took, I suppose?'

'Me? No. I leave that kind o' subject to them as has got less speritual insight then what I've got. No; I feel as I'm called to give a regular rouser on the duty o' children to their parents. While I was laid by in that there critical state as you was shocked to find

me in yesterday, I've 'ad time to think a deal, and the conduck of my own son's provided me with a subject ready to hand.'

'Why, bless me, Mr. Atherley, I should never have thought as Reuben was ondutiful!' said Mr. Tuppin, who had a weakness for the good natured, curly-headed young blacksmith.

'No, not so ondutiful as a many, he ain't, I'll own and allow,' said Atherley thoughtfully, 'but there's a want o' reverance and affection like towards me that I find very sinful in Reuben.'

'I should never have thought that, Mr. Atherley.'

'Aye, but it is so, and I can't make out why my son don't love me, I'm sure. Such a father as I've been to 'im, looking after 'is eternal welfare same as if it 'ad been my own. Four times every Sunday for 'ears I've took or drove 'im to the Chapel regular, twice to Sabbath school and twice to the preaching. Many's the time I've bent the toasting-fork

over 'is shoulders afore I could get 'im to stir from 'is breakfast of a Sunday morning and come along wi' me. And when I see 'im a-nodding in the sermon, I allays sent some one to shake 'im up like, for I sat in the singers' pew myself, and I couldn't be doing my duty not towards God and man at the same time. But when he'd growed to be a strapping young chap bigger than me, and beatings was out o' the question, then he took and spent his Sundays away from the Chapel, up to some ungodliness, I be bound, walking in the fields, playing chuck-penny, or off with the Church folks. So when he come home of a night and no account given o' where he'd been, I've reached down my Bible instead o' the toasting-fork, as being more suited to 'is 'ears, and read a few texes at 'im, and where they didn't hit 'im straight through, not knowing the circumstances exact, I've put in a few words o' my own to sharpen 'em up and give 'em a point, and I done it that natural the lad don't know where Paul left off and 'is father begun!'

'Well, Mr. Atherley, you done your best by your son, and you must 'ope for the best. By all I can 'ear Reuben's a steady lad, honest and truthful, and p'raps when he's older he'll come round to your way o' thinking after all.'

'I'm not for denying the lad 'as all them carnal virtues same as a Turk or a Jew might have,' said Atherley irritably, 'and I dessay he thinks a deal of hisself on account of 'em. But what I want to see is Reuben converted under Mr. Jukes same as I was myself under Mr. Tranter, and 'ave experience, and lead at the prayer-meetings when I'm ill, instead o' Tom Christie, and be a shining light and all that. I did once get 'im to come along wi' me and a few ripe Christian friends to 'ear Mr. Jukes preach a revival sermon, and when we come away he seemed that 'ardened like as if he'd nothing to say. So I asked 'im what he thought o' the preacher, and says he, "Why, father, I don't think as that chap 'ud make 'is twenty shillings a week at any other trade but the tub-thumping!" Where's the religion of

a young fellow as'll speak like that of 'is father's pastor, I should like to know?'

Mr. Tuppin was silent, but Atherley required no answer to his question, which was addressed to the universe in general and not to any of its inhabitants in particular, and he continued bitterly :

'It's that speritual pride in his carnal virtues as I want to see knocked out o' the lad! Now if I could ketch 'im in some young man's sin, or if he'd come 'ome drunk of a night, same as I did afore I got converted, I should know where I was with 'im, and should 'ave more 'opes of 'im. There ain't nothing to lay 'old of in 'is walk and conversation, and as long as that's the case he won't feel no want of a gospel, nor of a Mr. Jukes to save 'im. Sin goes afore grace, Mr. Tuppin ; but if a young man through speritual pride lives a life outwardly as good as 'is betters, he's nothing to give up like, there ain't much 'ope of 'is conversion. I've allays taught 'im faithful as he's a child of the devil ;

but he don't be'ave according, and what can I do? I've sat up nights and prayed, aye, prayed as the lad might come 'ome drunk, that I might take and ask him if he didn't feel no want o' the gospel then to deliver 'im from the bondage of 'is sins, and my heart's regular sunk in me like, when I 'ear 'im come up the stairs as sober as I was myself!'

'But ain't it dangerous wishing Reuben a drunkard and I don't know what all besides, in the 'opes of converting 'im from the error of 'is ways?' objected Mr. Tuppin. 'How do you know but he might be struck so, or took in 'is sins, or if he was converted you'd only be bringing 'im again to what 'e is now, and ha' trailed 'im through muck and mire back to clean living?'

'No, Mr. Tuppin, that's where you're mistook; it wouldn't be bringing 'im back to what he is now. It 'ud take the conceit out of 'im to 'ave a right down good fall as 'ud make 'im feel the want o' grace. I judge my own son

by my own self, and I know you must begin low if you mean to rise 'igh ; you must start from the bottom rung of the ladder if you're going to scale the 'eavenly 'eights. No ; if Reuben's to stick fast in 'is carnal virtues, he'll get 'ardened in 'em like, and 'ave no experience, nor feelings, nor nothing. He'll be no better than a proud Pharisee, and as such 'e'll remain in the outer courts o' the Gentiles,' said Atherley in a fine confusion of metaphor, bringing his open hand down on the table with a noise as loud as Mr. Jukes himself could have made on the edge of his pulpit, and startling the old man almost out of his chair.

Mr. Tuppin had hardly recovered himself before Reuben entered the kitchen, hot from the forge, in his dirty leather apron and paper cap, and holding an open letter in his black hand. His shining, honest face was covered with broad grins of delight. 'Father, here's ever such good news! This 'ere 's from Mrs. Windybank, to say as Mr. Dare operated the

day before yesterday, and mother's going on first-rate! God bless her!'

Atherley's stern face did not relax into a smile of tenderness or of pleasure at the good news, but he said, and meant what he said: 'I'm very glad to 'ear it, I'm sure; I'm very glad. And now I 'ope your mother 'll let bygones be bygones, and as we shall 'ear no more about this 'ere, for she's been trying enough over 'er illness, and made a deal of it; but women is poor-spirited creatures!'

'You 'aven't 'eard all, father! Mother sends word as she's got a grand piece o' news, and a big surprise for you and me when she comes back,' said Reuben excitedly.

'A pretty tale that! As if anyone shut up in a hospital could pick up news to bring 'ome with 'em! It's us that'll 'ave news to tell 'er, 'ow she's all but been made a widder on yesterday through my illness;' and Atherley leaned back in his chair and looked important.

'Ay, but it's a piece o' real news she's

got; listen 'ere to what Mrs. Windybank says,' and Reuben turned the letter over to consult it again, leaving a black thumb-mark on each page. "Here it is: "Your mother don't wish me to write word what it is, but I'm to tell you on Saturday next when I come home from staying at my cousin Pratt's. It's the queerest thing I've ever known happen, and will make you and your father uncommon proud." There, what do you think o' that, father?'

'Some nonsense as your mother and Mrs. Windybank 'as got up between 'em, I be bound;' for it would have been undignified for Atherley to let his son see that his curiosity was roused. 'Don't you excite yourself over it, Reuben, whatever it is; we shall know soon enough;' and the young man put the letter on the mantelpiece, and returned to his work lighter in heart for hearing good tidings of his mother.

'I'm very glad to 'ear as Mrs. Atherley's going on so well,' said Mr. Tuppin, who had sat in silence and was now preparing to leave,

for Atherley's manner did not disguise the fact that he wanted to be alone to compose, undisturbed, his sermon on the enormities of disobedient children.

'She'll get on all right, never fear! She's 'ad Mr. Dare to see after her, and that's more than I 'ad in my illness,' and he spread his papers before him with his large hands. 'This sermon as I'm writing now, I don't suppose as either Mrs. Atherley nor Reuben 'll come and 'ear me preach it, though anyone else's wife and son 'ud go miles to hear such a discourse!' and the blacksmith felt to the full the bitterness of the prophet disregarded in his own family.

'It's a pity, Mr. Atherley, it's a pity; and yet your wife's the best o' women, though she don't take properly to the Chapel folks and their ways, but I put that down to 'er not being brought up among 'em. I sometimes think she's so good, p'raps she's one o' those that the Lord 'll excuse for not making a profession!'

Atherley looked up quickly with an expression of alarm. 'Mr. Tuppin, I wouldn't 'ave Reuben 'ear you say them words for pounds! He's like enough to his mother as it is, without being encouraged in it, and 'aving excuses made for her conduct, which 'e knows 'as been 'ighly annoying to me upon a many occasions'' and Atherley's upper lip seemed to grow in length with self-satisfaction as he spoke.

'Don't put yourself about, Mr. Atherley, I'll come and 'ear your sermon;' and old Mr. Tuppin departed, wishing his friend had even a small share of the carnal virtues of his wife and son.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FATEFUL MIRROR

It is folly to pretend that one ever recovers wholly from a disappointed passion. Such wounds always leave a scar.

LONGFELLOW.

AT the close of the most terrible day in his life, Richard seized on his first moment of leisure to hasten to see Mrs. Peveril. It was ten o'clock as he stepped out of the hansom at her door, but he had occasionally called at as late an hour before, and to-night no apology would be necessary. He had only to tell her of the shock he had undergone to explain his unexpected appearance, and she had been so gentle and sweet when he last saw her, that he was sure of her sympathy in the strange mingling of joy and sorrow that had suddenly come upon him. He would pour out his heart to her, and tell her all.

Mrs. Peveril was at home, and not at home, that evening, receiving a visit that she was determined should not be spoiled by the presence of a third person. She had given orders that no one should be admitted, and if Richard had called only a few minutes earlier he would not have been able to see her. But just before his arrival the butler, deciding that no one was likely to call at so late an hour, had gone out to meet a few friends at a neighbouring public-house, deputing the care of the front door to a footman. He in his turn handed it on to a junior servant, but without telling him his mistress was at home to no one, and he opened the door in answer to Richard's knock and ring, and admitted him without hesitation. Mr. Dare was a frequent and privileged guest, but young and inexperienced as the servant was, he was surprised to see him run upstairs before him, and enter the drawing-room without giving him time to announce his name. Probably, however, his mistress was expecting him, so

he merely closed the door after him and went downstairs.

Richard glanced round the drawing-room. It was empty, and passing through it and a second nearly as large, he entered the third and smaller room beyond, where Mrs. Peveril usually sat when she was alone in the evening. The charm of the room consisted in its more comfortable and less magnificent size, in the absence of all sounds from the distant, noisy front of the house, and in the large conservatory opening into it that filled the air with perfumed freshness. It was furnished and decorated with great taste and luxury, but it, too, was empty; and Richard, supposing the servant had gone to call his mistress, threw himself, nerveless and exhausted, into an easy-chair, and leaned back with closed eyes.

Several minutes passed in silence, broken only by the ticking of a clock on the mantelpiece, where a gilded cherub seated on a gilded wire did duty for a pendulum, swing-

ing backwards and forwards with the untiring energy of a child at a school treat. And still Mrs. Peveril did not appear. It was nothing new for her to keep Richard waiting while she added some further touch of perfection to her toilet, more for her own pleasure than for his, and he did not feel impatient. After the tremendous strain he had undergone during the day he was grateful for a short interval of rest and quiet before he attempted to speak. But when he closed his eyes a haunting vision of the insensible form on the operating table rose before him from a background of darkness with horrible distinctness. He sat up and looked about him to dispel the ghastly illusion by the wholesome sight of everyday realities, the shaded lamps, the piano standing open as though Margaret had just left it, and the tall Bermuda lily on the small table by his chair. His eyes rested on all with the relief a man feels when he wakes from deadly nightmare, to recognise familiar objects in his room. He dared not close his

eyes again, and he found himself studying the pattern of the paper on the wall as though he had never seen it before, when his attention was suddenly attracted and riveted by the reflection in a large Venetian mirror of the interior of the conservatory. It was lighted from within, and through its open glass doors he seemed to look into an enchanted bower of flowers and green foliage. From the roof of the conservatory hung a yellow Chinese lantern, that, seen in the mysterious depths of the mirror, took a colder hue, and like a full moon shed a soft lustre on the unreal scene beneath it. Richard did not turn his head to compare the original with the flattered reflection before him. He had had stern reality enough that day, and the pretty, soothing picture pleased him without mental effort. Surely it was a magic mirror, that turned prose into poetry, and transformed an ordinary collection of plants and shrubs into a little garden of Eden.

Richard leaned back in his chair, still

looking at the fascinating mirrored picture, and filling in from memory what was out of sight. A little farther back to the right of the full-moon lantern, under the red lapageria climbing against the glass roof, were a couple of bamboo chairs, where he and Margaret had often sat, and he wondered if by changing his point of view he could bring them within the mirror's range of reflection.

The cherubic swinger, seated on his gilded wire, ticked out the minutes with unabated zeal, and the timepiece chimed the half-hour with silvery clearness, when Richard suddenly became aware that there was someone in the conservatory. He heard a soft whispering in a man's voice, too low to distinguish what was said, and yet he caught the word 'Margaret,' and in a moment every jaded sense was keenly alive. He leaned forward and looked into the mirror as though he were about to read his fate in its misty depths. There was a tremor and displacement of foliage in the green picture before him, then a

lovely white arm and hand reached forward to gather a flower, and Mrs. Peveril's whole figure appeared on the surface of the tell-tale mirror. She was dressed in deep, soft red, her snowy neck and arms gleaming against the dark leafy background.

Richard held his breath and gazed spell-bound, as the fair picture in the fateful mirror grew hideous. A second figure was visible on its clear surface, that of a tall fair man, with head bent forward and fingers vainly endeavouring to arrange the flower and sprig of myrtle Mrs. Peveril had just given him. 'Let me do it for you,' she said, and as she turned towards him, Richard saw in the living picture in the mirror that he caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

'She must know that they are seen!' Richard said, and springing to his feet with flaming eyes, quick as thought, he threw the table, flower-pot and plant to the floor with a crash.

A startled cry was heard, and Mrs. Peveril,

closely followed by the tall stranger, hastily entered the room from the conservatory. She paused when she saw Richard Dare, pale and defiant, with the overthrown table and broken flower-pot lying at his feet, and a look of terror passed over her face. But she recovered herself instantly, and hazarded everything upon the prompt utterance of a more or less probable falsehood.

'I see it is no one worse than yourself, Mr. Dare!' she said gaily. 'But how you frightened me with that tremendous noise. I thought it was burglars at the very least! How stupid to put that great plant on a small table, where it was sure to be upset in passing!' Then turning to the gentleman beside her who was looking haughtily at Richard, cursing him in his heart for a kill-joy, marplot, and clumsy bear over and above, she explained: 'This is Mr. Dare, my doctor. He called to see me this afternoon when I was out, and he is kind enough to look in upon me on his way home, as he knows I shall not be able to see him to-

morrow. Mr. Dare, Lord Haslemere,' and the two men bowed in sullen silence.

Neither of them had spoken yet, and Mrs. Peveril continued with feverish eagerness:

'Will you have the kindness to ring, and we will have this débris cleared away;' and Richard stepped to the bell, saying as he did so:

'Pray forgive my awkwardness: I had no idea of announcing myself so uncouthly.'

'You certainly made a deuce of a row,' muttered Lord Haslemere, gnawing his moustache and looking from under his eyebrows at the doctor's stern white face.

'Benson, we have had an accident; will you take this rubbish away?' said Mrs. Peveril to the servant who answered the bell, pointing to the broken flower-pot and soil that littered the carpet.

Lord Haslemere looked at his watch.

'As your doctor has come to see you, Mrs. Peveril, perhaps I had better say good-night.'

'There is not the slightest necessity that

Mr. Dare should frighten you away,' she said smiling. 'He will not detain me more than a few minutes: I must just see him in the library, and I will return directly;' and Lord Haslemere, who seemed to have the habit of doing Mrs. Peveril's bidding as Richard had, sulkily went back into the now disenchanted conservatory.

At a sign from Mrs. Peveril, Richard took up a lamp from the table and followed her across the hall to the library, stunned by her bold duplicity. He set the lamp on the mantelshelf, where the light fell full on her beautiful unabashed face, and his love for her was dying with a pang of mortal pain.

'Margaret,' he said in a husky voice, 'what is that man to you?'

'The very question Lord Haslemere is probably asking himself about you at this moment,' she replied as her colour came and went rapidly, in the vain effort to appear at her ease under the terrible gaze fixed upon her.

'If he should ask you that question as well as himself, you can tell him that I am nothing to you, less than nothing, and you will speak the truth. You told him I should only detain you a few minutes, and that also is true. It will not take me long to bid you good-bye.'

'Richard!' she said appealingly, but he did not seem to hear her.

'I tell you, women have been killed for less cruelty than you have treated me with! Unconsciously you influenced my life when I was a boy, and now, unconsciously to yourself, you have severed every tie that bound me to you. You could not give me your love, but you have just given me my freedom, and I thank you for it as the better gift,' and he moistened his dry lips, and looked at her without faltering.

'Your tongue is as keen as your own lancet! Are you mad?' she exclaimed.

'On the contrary, at last I am sane. I have only one thing more to say—If I were you I would do away with the mirror in the

small drawing-room. It reflects the conservatory, and anyone who may be in it, with absolute fidelity;' and the colour rushed to Mrs. Peveril's face in a wave of hot blushes that suffused it from brow to chin.

'It seemed to me that you ought to know that there was someone in the drawing room, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, I announced myself as a clumsy brute, though I must apologise for disturbing your *tête-à-tête*. I have not kept you long, that Lord Haslemere may see how truthful you are;' and he looked at her once more with eyes that were steeled against her beauty, and briefly bade her good-bye.

Mrs. Peveril did not make an effort to detain him. His words were unanswerable, and struck her with untempered severity. She had lost him, and she knew it. This was not the way in which she had intended to part from Richard Dare. She had reserved to herself the right of dismissing him when it was necessary or convenient to do so; but

he had forestalled her, and turned the tables on her altogether. She set her teeth, breathing hard between shame and indignation. She twisted her handkerchief about her fingers and tore its delicate lace into shreds, while she thought bitterly: 'There is a great deal of the blacksmith still in Richard Dare, when he had me between the hammer and the anvil! Benson shall go to-morrow, for disobeying my orders and admitting him! I shall never forgive the man,' and Mrs. Peveril returned smiling to the small drawing-room, after receiving the shortest visit ever paid by a doctor to a patient.

CHAPTER XXX

A TIMELY CALL

Whoever is out of patience, is out of possession of his soul.
BACON.

RICHARD left Mrs. Peveril's house in complete mental chaos. He laughed a tuneless laugh, and before it had died away his eyes grew hot with unshed tears. The emotions of a lifetime had been crowded into the last few days, his whole nature stirred to its depths, and before he had recovered his balance another unexpected and shattering blow had been dealt him. Brain, heart, and hand had alike been overstrained, and then followed the inevitable collapse.

Richard let himself in at his own house with a latch-key, and, though candle and matches stood as usual for him on the hall

table, he walked upstairs to his room in darkness, with the dragging step of an old man. He had now been forty hours without sleep, and for the greater part of the time in a state of extreme mental tension. Every limb was heavy with fatigue, but the activity of his brain made sleep an impossibility, while his mind continued to work with the clearness and discrimination a man brings to bear on the conduct and affairs of others rather than his own.

Throughout the ordeal in the hospital, Johanna's courage and calmness had upheld him, and he cursed his own folly for imagining that Mrs. Peveril would sympathise with him in joy or sorrow. In this moment of clear vision he asked himself, when had she ever done anything but first attract him and then tantalise him, and, when he grew restive, forge fresh chains to hold him captive. Richard had gone to her at the end of this unique day in his life, to pour out his heart to her, sure that she would be touched to

hear of the poor loving mother, so wonderfully given back to her son at the moment when his skill was equal to her dire necessity. What woman could hear of it without her heart swelling within her? He had expected her to be moved to tenderness when she realised that it was she herself who unconsciously exercised the charm that years ago robbed the forlorn mother of her son. In his overwrought state he even felt that he was, in a sense, responsible for the blow that had fallen on his mother's breast. If Mrs. Peveril was sincere in her appreciation of his surgical skill, she would rejoice that it had been so triumphantly applied, and her sympathy would restore his shaken nerves, and bring him tranquillity and rest. He had even been so sanguine as to imagine she might now definitely consent to become his wife, and put an end to the vagueness and vacillation that were eating out his heart.

But Richard was not destined to get so far even as the beginning of his story. The

mirror on the wall, that spoke truth if all the world lied, while it had opened his eyes, sealed his lips, and left him nothing to say but to bid Mrs. Peveril good-bye once and for ever. He recalled with shame and loathing the reflected picture of the scene in the conservatory, when he had so roughly announced his presence to the lovers. Very likely she was making a fool of Lord Haslemere as she had done of him: let the poor wretch enjoy his illusion while it lasted.

Richard looked back in wonder on the years in which Margaret had been his guiding star, and where had she led him at last? He had been at his best while he worshipped her at a distance, but he was conscious that under her immediate mundane influence his love had sunk by swift descent to passion of the earth earthy, which was all that Mrs. Peveril could inspire in a lover near at hand. Everything he had loved in her, he had first lavished on her from the wealth of his own imagination. It was but a modern version of the old story

of Pygmalion, which is repeated every day—he had fallen in love with the beautiful image of his own creation.

Richard paced his room, urged to exhausting activity by the storm in his brain that did not allow him a moment's repose of mind or body. He looked back on the years wasted in idealising a false and shallow nature, with a passion of regret. He had given Margaret of his best without counting the cost, and she had played with his love, debased it, and thrown it aside. Then he asked himself if he had not behaved savagely to the woman he had loved so long, when he wrenched himself free from her toils? If he had done so he was wrong. He could not be too hard on her while he himself was to blame for permitting her to play with him as a cat plays with a mouse. He might have regained his freedom honourably, but the fascination of her beauty kept him her slave, even after he knew her to be heartless and suspected her of wantonness. He was reaping what he

had sown, and surely he expiated his folly when, wounded in love, pride and honour, he beheld himself without any lingering illusions, stripped of every artificial stay by which self-esteem had hitherto buoyed him up.

The neighbouring church clocks struck three, and the chill that precedes the dawn passed like a shiver through the great city, while Richard kindled a fire and fed it with his dearest treasures. He took a stern delight in destroying every outward token of his wasted passion and misplaced faith. He tore in pieces a pile of perfumed notes, and throwing them into the grate till the paper rose high above the bars, dropped a match into the inflammable mass, and the quickly kindled flame leapt up and cast his flickering shadow, distorted and magnified, on wall and ceiling. As it sank low, he revived it with fresh fuel, a handful of letters, a glove, a lock of red-gold hair, and, to complete the sacrifice, he thrust Mrs. Peveril's portrait into the heart of the fire, and watched it curl up in the

heat, burn, and consume away, till nothing remained but trembling tinder. He was so absorbed that as he took the picture from his pocket he did not hear something fall and strike the fender with a sharp sound.

Richard knelt before the hearth watching the bright sparks run quickly over the rustling tinder and die out into blackness, and he shuddered and spread his hands to the warmth that still lingered in the fireless grate. As he rose from his knees, with grim and haggard face, something lying in the fender caught his eye, and he picked it up mechanically. A strange feeling of recognition thrilled through him as his fingers closed on the phial of poison he had carried about with him for twenty-four hours, till he had drawn it inadvertently from his pocket as he took out Mrs. Peveril's portrait. He recalled his resolution, and the frame of mind in which he had made it when he provided himself with the means of instantaneous death. He remembered, too, he had imagined that in the

doubtful event of his mother surviving the operation, he should be the most thankful soul alive, yet in the present chaos of his mind he felt no strong emotion of any kind, but dull collapse at the very heart of him.

As a man fascinated by gazing into sheer space till a vertigo seizes him and he flings himself over the precipice, Richard dallied with the thought of death while he held the means of it in his hand. He drew the stopper from the phial, inhaled the flat, faint smell of the dark fluid it contained, moistened the tip of his finger with it, and put it to his lips, and at that moment was as nearly off his mental balance as a sane man can be. He perfectly understood the danger of the morbid fascination the poison possessed for him in his exhausted and excited state. Had he been his own patient, he would have known how to act firmly to restore his overwrought brain to its habitual calm sanity. He had no desire for death, nor determination to kill himself because of a present trouble, which, given

time and fortitude, would prove to resemble the sharpness of an operation necessary for the restoration of health and soundness. He saw the sin and folly of self-murder as he would see it in the case of another, but so long as he held in his hand the means of immediate death he was swayed by the morbid attraction of the thought, and was in peril as urgent as the exhausted swimmer in deep water, with none near to help him.

Richard raised the phial to his lips. A movement of the arm towards himself and he would have swallowed the poison; a movement of the arm from himself and he would have hurled the temptation away and delivered himself from its power. Drops of sweat burst out on his brow, wrung from him by the intensity of the struggle. There seemed no help at hand in his brief insanity, when a loud peal of the night-bell rang through the house and recalled him to himself. He dashed the phial in a hundred fragments on the hearth, and was saved. The discipline of years, the

ingrained habit of doing his duty promptly, stood him in good stead at that supreme moment, and he instinctively obeyed its call.

Without waiting to ask through the speaking-tube what he was wanted for, Richard ran from the room and hastened downstairs, snatching his hat as he hurried across the hall, and the bell was rung in an agony of impatience a second time before he could open the door.

'I'm ready: what do you want me for?' he asked, as he left the house and pulled the door to after him, and a tall, grey-haired man, half-dressed in trousers and night-shirt, withdrew his hand from the bell, seized the doctor by the arm and hurried him along the pavement in his grasp. The freshness of dawn was in the air, and quiet, deep as that of the country, brooded over the long, monotonous street, where the only human being visible except themselves was the lamplighter, busied in turning out the gas, that burnt pale and yellow in the morning light.

Still steered by the arm, Richard was led at a headlong pace across the road and round the corner, diving into a mews where the horses, already awake, were stamping in their stalls; through it and out again into a gloomy and shabby street, consisting chiefly of small lodging-houses. All the while his guide muttered to himself without ceasing.

'Speak up: you haven't told me yet what you want me for, why you're in such a deuce of a hurry!' said Richard, almost breathless, wrenching himself free of his captor. 'No doctor's bound to go with you at such an hour unless he knows he's really wanted. Is it an accident or a labour?'

For the first time his guide spoke audibly, in short gasps, and hitching up his braceless trousers as he strode along by his side.

'You're wanted, sure enough, sir, if it ain't too late; but labour it isn't, for he's a man, and you can't hardly call it a' accident when he's threatened a hundred times he'd do it yet. It's suicide, sir, that's about it. He's a young man, a

tailor, is Mr. Tinkler, my lodger, and my name's Tarver; he's just took and pisoned hisself!'

Richard started. 'What in the world for? Was the man in trouble?'

'No more nor the rest of us, sir, so far as I know. He kep' company wi' a young woman no better than she'd ought to be, and she walked Sunday arternoons wi' a guardsman from Kensington barracks, and he took it very 'ard. He's killed hisself for a woman!' and the landlord entered the open front door of his shabby house, where several frightened women stood whispering together in the passage.

'Out of the way all of you! 'Ere's the doctor,' and a clearance was instantly made, and Richard followed the master of the house up the narrow staircase to a small front room on the third floor.

'Killed himself for a woman!' he inwardly repeated, and restored to his own sanity by the madness of another man, he passed sentence on himself. 'I have been a fool; let me expiate my folly by coming to the rescue of a fellow fool!'

As they entered the close little room, the candle standing on the dressing-table, burnt low in the socket, afforded a flickering light in expiring leaps of flame that filled the atmosphere with a rank smell of hot tallow. Richard dropped the extinguisher on it as he passed, and going straight to the window, threw it open to its widest extent, admitting the wholesome light and freshness of morning to chase away the dimness and staleness within. This done, he turned to the iron bedstead against the wall in quest of the patient, whom it was impossible to approach through a solid barrier of women bending over him, effectually depriving him of any chance of fresh air. They were huddled together in various stages of undress, and in every gradation of hysterics from mere gobbling sounds to shrill cries, and all alike incapable of lending a helping hand.

Richard scattered them to right and left.

'Turn four of these five women out of the room,' he said; 'the oldest may stay: she doesn't seem quite such a bewildered fool as

the others. Tell her to bring me a bucket of cold water instantly.'

'Ay, sir, she's my wife, and used to doing what she's told,' and Mrs. Tarver nimbly disappeared to do her husband's bidding.

The patient was in a desperate condition and presented a lamentable appearance, as Richard felt the almost pulseless wrist and listened to the faint, intermittent flutter of the heart. He was a lean, sallow-complexioned man of about five-and-twenty, lying stretched on the bed in his shirt, one arm hanging over the edge of the bed, the other by his side, still grasping in his clammy hand an empty laudanum bottle. His lips were livid, his eyes sunk, his features pinched, and his thin dark hair matted with cold sweat on his brow. There were all the signs of narcotic poisoning present, apart from the evidence afforded by the empty bottle, and the patient's breath smelling strongly of laudanum.

Richard dashed cold water freely over the face and breast of the dying man, shook him

by the shoulders and shouted at him ; and Mrs. Tarver, recognising a remedy in which she could join, cried shrilly in his dull ears : ' What you done it for, Mr. Tinkler ; what you done it for ? '

' How long has he been in this state ? ' asked Richard.

' Not more'n ten minutes when I fetched you, sir. He didn't come in till two o'clock, and his young woman brought him home, and I 'card them having words in the street under the window. Then me and Mrs. Tarver 'eard 'im come upstairs and slam the door, and keep on walking, walking over our 'eads, till I thought there'd be no sleep for us that night. All of a sudden he stopped, and my missus says, " 'E's done it this time for sure ! " and was for going up to see why he was so quiet. I told 'er he'd only got into his bed at last, and 'ud be nat'rally angry if she went werriting 'im in 'is room. But go she would, and blest if she wasn't right after all, for women 'll sometimes 'it the mark quicker than them that's

guided by reason. I didn't fear nothing, for he was always threatening to kill hisself if Bella wouldn't 'ave 'im. It was "I'll shoot myself," or "I'll cut my throat!" as easy as you'd say "I'll tie my shoe"; and I'd use to say, "Well, Mr. Tinkler, if you are obligated to kill yourself, I hope you'll do it decent and tidy, and not leave nothing in my house to be cleaned up after you"; and that 'll be why he's done it wi' pison, sir, instead of 'is razor. He was always the gentleman, was Tinkler.'

While Tarver was holding forth, and rubbing the patient's arms and working them up and down, Richard was writing a message on his card.

'There's not a moment to be lost. Run to my house and ring till you wake my servant, and he will give you the things I ask for on this card. With them we may possibly save this man's life, without them we can do nothing; and send me in a couple of your neighbours at once to help me and follow out my directions;' and Tarver left the house as

fast as legs could carry him to do the doctor's bidding.

Two men, neighbours of Tarver's, soon came hurrying up the stairs, with rough heads and glazed faces, only just waked from sleep, but ready and willing to help as they were told. They supported the patient under the arms, and endeavoured to rouse him from his comatose state by making him walk, while Richard struck him with wet towels, or dashed cold water on the limp figure as it was trailed across the room, and Mrs. Tarver looked on horror-struck, fearful that if it was not a case of suicide, it was likely to end in murder.

'Mind you, this sleep is death unless we can rouse him from it,' said Richard; 'find a hand-bell somewhere, one of you, and ring it in his ears!'

But all was in vain. The patient grew every moment more limp and clammy, his breathing slower and more stertorous, and the men who bore him about the room in a hideous dance of death panted with fatigue.

When Tarver returned, after what seemed an age, with the stomach-pump and electric battery, the use of them did not restore consciousness, and only impressed the lay spectators with the idea that a corpse was being very irreverently handled.

When at length, after three hours' urgent and unremitting effort to recover him, the man was obviously and undeniably dead, Richard would hardly admit the fact, even to himself. He applied a final and stronger current of electricity to the body, when Tarver laid his hand on his arm: 'Don't do no more, sir; it's only torturing a poor 'armless corpse. You've been a true friend to 'im, sir, but poor Tinkler's done it this time and no mistake!'

Richard was keenly disappointed at the result of his fruitless labour. He had done all in his power to restore the weak-headed young man, whose debtor he was to the extent of his own life, which had been saved only by the timely summons to his aid. Poor

Tinkler had thrown away his own life, but in doing so he had prolonged another and a more useful life, and restored perfect sanity to a strong brain when it reeled. It was a riddle there was no solving, and Richard reverently bowed his head.

'Ay, and he done what can never be undone, all for a woman, and a worthless baggage at that,' said Tarver, looking at the corpse with its pinched face and expression so dead it was hard to think it had ever been alive, even to the extent of the recent stertorous breathing.

'Lord, it's a queer world! Did you ever 'ear of a man committing a rash hact for the sake of a decent, respectable sort of a body like his aunt or his grandmother? No, nor they don't do it neither! It's for some hussy or other they kill theirselves, and when you look at 'im laying there it don't 'ardly seem worth while. And he's got a widowed mother alive down in Kent, and I shall 'ave to go and break the news to her somehow,

and a nasty job that 'll be,' said the landlord in an injured tone.

Richard had not spoken for some minutes, and was on the point of leaving the room, but he stopped to say, 'Yes, that's bad; I don't envy you the task. The young woman will only take the event as a compliment to herself, but it will break the old one's heart!'

CHAPTER XXXI

DRAWING NEARER

I will not have you say a woman's part
Must be to give exclusive love alone;
Dearest, although I love you so, my heart
Answers a thousand claims besides your own.
ADELAIDE PROCTOR.

SAMUEL ATHERLEY'S astonishment was overwhelming when Mrs. Windybank informed him that the great surgeon who had successfully operated on his wife was none other than his own runaway son Richard.

'Ay, but it's true, Mr. Atherley; it's true as you stand staring there!' Mrs. Windybank repeated. 'Mr. Dare's your own lawful getting, though no one 'ud think it, to look at you, nor to look at 'im, as Samuel Atherley was 'is father. Your wife 'll tell you all about it when she comes 'ome. It's put new life into

her, I can tell you ; she's got what she's been fretting after for fourteen 'ears past.'

'I don't like that changing of 'is name, though,' objected Atherley as soon as he could speak. 'I doubt it's ondutiful,' and he pursed up his mouth.

'Why, didn't I just tell you what 'e done it for?' replied the intrepid little woman. 'It was a-purpose you shouldn't find out where he was, and get 'old of 'im again. 'E's made 'is fame and 'is fortune in the name of Dare, and no thanks to 'is father, and you see 'e'll stick to it!'

'Well, wi' all his drawbacks, I always said the lad took after me. He'd a good head-piece, had Richard, when he chose to use it ; but he'd too much of his mother's temper about him, he wouldn't stand no chastisement. Only to think of him now a fine doctor in London, getting his ten shillings a job, I be bound, operating 'ere and operating there, and on 'is own mother, too! I hown and allow I'm more surprised than ever I was in all my

life afore, and it takes a deal to surprise Sam Atherley. Is he a good-looking sort of a man; does he feature me, Mrs. Windybank?' and the blacksmith glanced, not without complacency, at his long face reflected in the small mirror on the mantelshelf.

'Im like you! Not a bit of it! 'E's 'is mother's son all over; you'd know him by that. We shall all be proud o' Richard, I can tell you!' and Mrs. Windybank hurried away to pay a house-to-house visitation among the neighbours who remembered the blacksmith's boy, to tell of his fortune and renown, and the touching meeting of mother and son after all!

Dormington thought of nothing else, and talked of nothing else for several days, but the romance of their fellow-townsman. The men over their beer, the women at their tea, and the children at play, all told and retold each other the story of the blacksmith's runaway son, with such additions and variations as were due to rampant imagination and

inaccurate acquaintance with facts. Samuel Atherley suddenly found himself a person of great importance in the town. Everyone, from the vicar of the parish downwards, called to ask him for details, some expressing astonishment that a son of his had so distinguished himself, others congratulating him on the unlooked-for honour. If only the wonderful discovery had been made in his unregenerate days, how he would have enjoyed telling the story, sitting, tankard in hand, the hero of the assembled company at the Barley Mow! If his son was changed past recognition, so was he, and he must content himself nowadays with telling the story dry, in the vestry after preaching. It occurred to him that at the present juncture a sermon from him on the return of the Prodigal Son might be well received at Ebenezer Chapel.

Reuben was greatly fired with the thought of his elder brother reappearing after long years as a distinguished man. His mother had fed his childish imagination with legends

of Richard's strength, goodness, and bravery; so that even in his grown-up mind something of the heroic surrounded his name like a halo. He glowed with pride when Mrs. Windybank told him that everyone in London knew Richard Dare, and then blushed as he wondered how the great doctor would like a rough, ignorant chap like him for a brother.

'There's only one thing I envy my brother Richard for,' he said. 'I do envy 'im curing mother. I'd rather ha' done that nor anything else, if I could!'

Mrs. Atherley could not make up her mind how she ought to address her distinguished son. When he entered the room to pay her his daily professional visit, he was Mr. Dare and doctor, then gradually he became Richard, and eventually 'my lad,' which comfortable name she liked best and used most frequently. But when it came to saying good-bye, she felt as though her familiarity had been almost a liberty, and she addressed him as 'Sir.'

Mother and son had many a talk together during her convalescence, and she poured out her simple heart to him. She gave him in minute detail the history of her husband's reformation, brought about by Tom Christie and the folks at Ebenezer, and how he was nowadays a great man among the Chapel people. Richard was heartily glad to hear it, but he found it less difficult to imagine his father a sober man at home than a preacher and prayer-leader abroad. It was only after much explanation in answer to many questions, interrupted by bursts of laughter from Richard, that his mother made him understand Atherley's leading position in the little world at Ebenezer Chapel.

'And is Reuben a preacher, too?' he asked, recalling vividly the sleeping form of his little brother as he had last seen him, but feeling that no change was too great to be possible—'Is Reuben a preacher, too?'

'No, my lad, and he don't shape to be one neither, and that's where he vexes your

father. He don't hold wi' the Chapel. He says Church is good enough for him, and he won't sit in the singers' pew nor nothing, though he's a voice you can hear down the street; and since he's walked wi' Susan Windybank he goes to Church wi' her of a Sunday morning. Which are you, my lad, Church or Chapel?'

'My dear mother, I think I've been more hospital than either one or the other, but if ever I spend a Sunday in Dormington, depend upon it I shall go to Church with you, as I did when I was a boy.'

'When will you come home, Richard, and shake hands wi' your father?' she asked timidly.

Her son was silent for a moment.

'I'll come if you wish it, mother. I'll run down when you're settled at home and stronger than you are now,' and Mrs. Atherley's grey eyes beamed with tranquil happiness.

Mr. Dare's relationship to his patient, and

his mother's recognition of him in the operating theatre, had become known throughout the hospital in an incredibly short time, and the great surgeon was the hero of the hour. His students adored him, his patients regarded him as something more than human, while his fellow-doctors appreciated the rare qualities of heart and brain that enabled him, for his mother's sake, so successfully to merge the son in the surgeon. The story found its way into the papers, with many omissions and embellishments, together with a garbled account of the cause of his change of surname, that bore a specious air of probability.

Richard's first impulse was to contradict the statement. He sat down to his desk and wrote to the most offending paper, and then asked himself, after all what did it signify? Could he not do his work as well under the name of Dare as Atherley? Whom did it concern in the wide world but himself which name he chose to bear? Johanna was the only person to whom he cared to explain his

affairs, and she knew all the facts of his life. The fine old motto of Marischal College occurred to him, 'They say. What say they? Let them say!' and he smiled and tore up the letter.

Johanna asked to be spared for a day to take Mrs. Atherley home, at the end of her three weeks' stay in the hospital, and Richard thanked her with a warmth that recalled his early manner. The Sister's request was readily granted by the authorities on account of the relation the patient bore to Mr. Dare, as there was no fear that it would establish a precedent, by a like combination of circumstances occurring again. Another prompting, besides that of humanity pure and simple, impelled Johanna to travel with Mrs. Atherley to Dormington. She had a strong desire to visit the scene of Richard's boyhood, and she would have endeavoured some time to gratify her wish, had there been no question of his invalid mother in the case. She spent only two hours in Dormington, but in that

short time she saw and noted every detail of the home, and under pretence of taking a vivid interest in Reuben's trade, was shown the smithy, and there pictured to herself Richard carrying on his anatomical researches, and when detected or interrupted in them, resentfully blowing the big bellows. How strangely things are brought about by the whirligig of time, that Johanna Gage should linger with thoughtful steps where Margaret Featherstone, once carelessly entering, had turned the course of a human life! Johanna travelled back to town that night, glad that she had seen her patient welcomed home again, but still better pleased that she could now definitely realise the setting and framework of Richard's early life.

The next time Richard met Johanna he had many questions to ask about the old home.

'Was my mother's chair, a high-backed rocking-chair, standing in its old place by the fire?' he asked.

'Yes, and very comfortable it looked, with a screen about it that your brother had rigged up.'

'Ah! Reuben; what sort of a young fellow has he grown? He was a bright, bold child.'

'Reuben is a fine strong young man, with a pair of honest grey eyes, and a laugh that does one good to hear. He is not in the least like you,' she added.

'What did you think of my father, Johanna? Tell me frankly: I want to have an outside opinion of him; my mother's, of course, is not impartial.'

'You will soon see him for yourself, Richard, and can form your own opinion. I saw him at work in the smithy, and I know now exactly how the place must have looked when you were a boy. The big bellows seemed like an old friend, and I peeped into the dark corner where you boiled the puppy's bones over the charcoal brazier, and I saw the path between the house and the smithy,

leading to the garden, where you tried to hurry away with your treasure, when you inopportunely met your father. The whole scene rose before me as if I had been present when it happened,' and Johanna's voice betrayed more feeling than could be accounted for by the grotesque reminiscence.

'Johanna, I wish I had known you when you were a girl and I was a boy.'

'But what do you call us when we first met? You were not a man then, were you? I certainly was not grown up.'

'I thought I was a man, but I've since decided that I was only a fool. Johanna, I have often wished you had never left England when you did;' and she felt that Richard was speaking to her in veiled language, with an undercurrent of meaning which he would not make clear.

'It is no use regretting any step that one believed to be right at the time,' she replied. 'My uncle decided everything for me in those

days, but since I returned to England alone you have had the guidance of my life.'

'I guided your life?' said Richard, startled to hear from Johanna's lips almost the same words and the identical thought he had expressed to Mrs. Peveril about himself and her.

'Indeed it is so. I should not be where I am, or what I am, but for you. Do you not remember the failure I made attempting to be an artist, and the talk we had together in my studio before my diploma picture of incapacity? and how you urged me to come down from the heights and direct my powers to learning to be a hospital nurse?'

'Yes, I remember it all perfectly; but do you mean to say that my words had such weight with you that they led you to take up with a career that would never have attracted you for its own sake?' and Richard looked at her in grave bewilderment.

'You might have known that long ago, if you had not been so preoccupied by your

profession. But don't suppose that I have not found other pleasures in my work besides that of pleasing you,' Johanna said, smiling as Richard continued grave and thoughtful.

'I am glad of that. But—Johanna, I have been a man under a spell. I am only now beginning to see people and things as they are, and not as they seemed to me, and I see you rising clear out of the cloud of misapprehension I had wrapped about you'—when a nurse came into the room to say Sister Johanna was wanted immediately, and Richard was silenced by her entrance.

CHAPTER XXXII

BACK IN THE FORGE

Let no one think that he can conquer the first impressions of his youth.—GOETHE.

On a bright September morning Richard was travelling westward to Dormington, through a rich country where the harvest was being carried. The express rushed along its narrow track between breadths of fruitful land, yellow fields below and blue sky above, and the steam from the engine rising in white and buoyant masses formed a miniature image of the bright clouds overhead.

He was alone in the carriage, sitting by the window with an open book turned face downwards on his knee, while he gave his undivided attention to the landscape he had last seen under such different circumstances. It was hard to realise that he was the run-

away lad in the railway waggon, who had cautiously lifted up the waterproof covering to peep out of his hiding-place and try to find out whether he was travelling north or south. The express overtook and shot past a luggage-train with its long chain of tarpaulin-covered trucks, the very duplicate of that in which he had made his memorable journey to London, and he vaguely wondered whether it carried any poor stowaway on board. If it did, he wished him good luck and an easier mode of travelling next time.

Richard was due at Dormington a couple of hours before his family expected to see him, for it occurred to him after writing to his mother fixing the time of his arrival, that his father would be sure to put on his Sunday clothes for the occasion, and the only way to prevent it would be to come by an earlier train. The meeting would be a strained and difficult one under any circumstances, and he did not wish it to be rendered ridiculous as well, by his father receiving him in a preacher's

black coat and white choker. It would be best and simplest to come upon him and Reuben at their work; and to take off the formality of his own appearance, Richard left his frock-coat and tall hat in town, and travelled in an unprofessional-looking tweed suit.

As he walked through the well-remembered streets of Dormington, he caught sight of many familiar faces that he looked upon with strange yearning, because he had known them when he was a boy. But no one knew him, and he passed through his native town unrecognised by friend or acquaintance, as though he were wrapped in the mantle of invisibility. The mystic cloak might have been his, but scarcely the shoes of swiftness, for he was half an hour walking through the main streets of the little town, so much was there to make him linger on the way. He noted every change time had brought about in fourteen years, and for the most part condemned them without hesitation.

There was a general, flashy, smartening up of the streets, that jarred on his remembrance of their original simplicity. The shops were more numerous, and gay with plate-glass and gilding, and in the fever of competition, tradesmen, vying one against another, had covered the fronts of their houses up to the second storey with staring coloured advertisements. As Richard turned into the market-place, he saw that Dormington did not wear its every-day aspect: some local festivity was evidently on hand. The Union Jack floated on the top of the town hall, ropes of flowers and evergreens were slung across the road, and from the upper windows of the houses small flags projected, the stick secured by the closed sash like a short pipe held between the front teeth. He had not the curiosity to ask what the decorations were for, and having seen the familiar spot once more, he turned into the High Street, and then, with slow steps and quickly beating heart, entered the enclosure in front of his father's forge.

Not a thing was altered since he turned his back on the place fourteen years ago. There was the same grimy half-door he had leaned on, when he talked with his mother on that memorable day, with the upper part thrown back like a shutter. There was the same iron ring in the wall where he had fastened Mr. Featherstone's cob, and there was the mounting-block, on which Margaret had stood for an instant—but he would not think of her. Instead, he compelled himself to recall the habitual association connected with it, that of his little brother Reuben, who spent most of his time climbing up and falling off it again. Richard stood and looked through the wide, unglazed window straight into the smithy.

The tuneful ring of the hammer on the anvil, and the roar of the bellows, like the deep breathing of a short-winded dragon, sounded strangely familiar in his ears, and advancing towards the open door, he watched the stalwart young blacksmith at his work,

swinging the hammer with his grand muscular arm as though it were a child's toy. It was Reuben, his brother Reuben, there could be no mistake about it, and as he was too busy striking while the iron was hot to raise his eyes, Richard had time to observe keenly his strong, good-humoured face. He was a fine young fellow, with splendid arms and shoulders, and a crop of curly hair that brush and comb were powerless to subdue, and his heart went out to him on the spot. Reuben did not look up; he turned his head and shouted at the boy blowing the bellows, then, throwing aside his finished work to cool, he drew a piece of red-hot iron with pincers from the fire, and holding it on the anvil, began to shape it under a shower of blows from the hammer. Obeying a sudden impulse, Richard stripped off his coat and entered the smithy turning up his sleeves, while Reuben paused in his work and looked at the stranger with amazement. Before he knew what he was about, a pair of large white hands, almost as strong as his

own, had quietly taken hammer and pincers from him.

'Let me have a turn at this,' Richard said as he pushed the young blacksmith aside, and took his place at the anvil.

With the touch of hammer and pincers such skill as Richard had ever boasted in the blacksmith's craft returned to him, and he wrought as good a horse-shoe as he had ever turned out, while the perspiration ran down his brow, and the muscles started like cords on his arms.

The bellows-blower stopped from sheer astonishment, and Reuben's thoughts were chaotic as he stood mutely watching the man who had taken his work out of his hands. He could not say for the life of him why he had not resisted the attempt. There was something about the man that if he had told him to put his hand in the fire, he should have done it. It was not the first time those large white hands had worked in a forge, he saw that at a glance. He did not know the face,

yet there was something in the eyes, in the smile, that seemed familiar, and touched a soft spot in his heart. At length, when the stranger paused for a minute, for his hammer did not keep up a uniform, rhythmical shower of blows like the young blacksmith's, Reuben said suddenly, with a catch in the breath that was almost a sob, 'You're Richard, brother Richard!'

The amateur blacksmith threw down hammer and pincers with the unfinished horse-shoe, and laughed aloud as he grasped Reuben's black and horny hand.

'How in the name of wonder did you find that out, Reuben? Did you remember my face?'

'It wasn't your face I recognised, I knew you by your work. Directly I see you handle that bit o' hot iron, I remembered father always said as Richard 'ud never make a blacksmith, he 'adn't got the way of it,' said the uncompromising Reuben. But he added, 'I'm main glad too see you, and so

will mother be, though you're come afore we expected you. I'll go and tell father you're here; he'll be put about, for he meant to ha' had on his Sunday black things to ha' met you in. You'd better wash your hands in that tank, you're not used to having 'em smudged like that,' and he pointed hospitably to a lump of yellow soap and a towel of dubious colour.

'All right, but don't say I am here; say a stranger wishes to speak to him,' and Reuben hurried off in search of the blacksmith, and it seemed to his brother as if he must look for him at the Barley Mow. But times were indeed changed, as his mother had told him, for he returned shortly, bringing with him an eminently sober father. Reuben was laughing excitedly, and saying the gentleman wouldn't give his name, when Sam Atherley, with bare arms and blackened leather apron, entered the smithy, and father and son stood face to face on the very spot where they had parted in hot anger fourteen years before.

Atherley was not as much changed as his son had expected to see him after so great a lapse of time.

His temperate life had improved his health and postponed his old age, and, beyond being thinner and his hair greyer, he was not appreciably altered. The change was chiefly in his expression. The surly, bullying look was almost gone, replaced by an air of self-righteous, cold self-complacency which struck Richard as no improvement, as he looked in his face without bias of any kind. In the first moment of meeting after a long separation, the mind receives a true impression, and we see one another as we really are.

Richard grew very pale, while his father looked at him with an uncertain, troubled gaze. He took the cap from his grey head, and turned it round in his horny hands, and moistened his thin lips in an ineffectual effort at speech. He was strongly moved; he

did not know what to say, and any show of emotion was abhorrent to him.

'Sir, do I see Mr. Dare?' he said with difficulty.

'Not Mr. Dare to you; you see your son; call me Richard,' and he took his father's passive hand in his.

Atherley was as near shedding tears as was possible to a man of his temperament. He swallowed hard and winked rapidly, and as soon as he was sure of himself he spoke in his ordinary voice and manner.

'So your mother was right after all! She stuck to it as you'd come home again some day. And now you're come earlier than what you said, or I should ha' had my Chapel things on to meet you in, for you'd ought to have a father you can be proud of, such a man as you be nowadays. Well, to be sure, to have a doctor like you for my son, even if he 'as thrown off his father's name and calls hisself by another, it's a matter o' pride. I always thought you'd make out summat,

though you didn't go about it right side forrard when you was a lad; I thought you'd make out summat, but not as a blacksmith, you understand—not as a blacksmith,' and Reuben laughed uproariously.

'Reuben will carry on the family trade, and do it well. The place isn't changed; it looks just the same as it did when last I saw it,' and Richard cast a keen glance round the smithy, trying not to recall the bright vision of Margaret Featherstone. 'We are changed, but nothing else is that I can see.'

'Ay, we're both on us changed and come to 'igh honours, and I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, I am,' said Atherley pompously, regarding his son with pride in his heart but condescension on his tongue.

'And you're still a' onmarried man, sir?' said the blacksmith, who could not yet bring himself to call the strange gentleman Richard.

'Yes, I'm an old bachelor.'

'Indeed,' said Atherley in his most sententious manner, 'as I lately remarked in a

sermon I preached on behalf of the Society for the Propagation of Sunday School Teachers, marriage was made for man, and man was made for marriage, and some day mayhap you 'll think better on it, and change your state. Why, your brother Reuben, 'ere, he is but nineteen, and he walks wi' a young woman a'ready.'

'What, are you going to be married, old fellow? You must introduce me to your sweetheart,' said Richard cordially; and Reuben was seized with a fit of shyness, that was exceedingly funny in such a burly young man.

'Susan Windybank won't be Mr. Dare's sort; he's used to fine ladies, but she does very well for you and we,' said Atherley, whose manner and sentiments were equally unpleasant to Richard.

'I want to see my mother,' he said by way of changing the subject; 'how is she to-day?'

Reuben replied, 'I told her you was here, though she didn't expect you afore tea-time.

She's waiting for you in the kitchen; come along wi' me,' and he followed his good-humoured young brother willingly.

'My lad, my lad!' sobbed the poor woman, rising from her chair and throwing her arms about her son's neck; 'and was your father kind to you? did he forgive you?'

'My dear mother, it's give and take in the matter of forgiveness between him and me. We're all right, there is nothing you need distress yourself about; come, sit down, and I'll sit by you,' and he took her wasted hand in his.

'Only think o' me living to see this joyful day after all! You back again in the old home, my lad, if it's only for an hour! I want to say the words I'd used to hear at Church—I've never heard them at the Chapel, they don't know 'em there—"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!" I've got all I want, I don't want nothing more,' and tears of pure rapture ran down her pale face.

'Come now, missis, none o' that, don't you

take on!' said Atherley, who had followed them into the kitchen; 'if that's how you show your j'y it's uncommon like your grieving.'

'It will do my mother good to weep,' said Richard, still holding her hand; 'she cannot help it, she is very weak.'

'Ay, and no one knows but me what it is to have a wife like her,' said Atherley feelingly. 'Her weepings all them years you kep' yourself hid from us was day and night. And yet she'd a deal to be thankful for, and a husband more thought of than any of 'em at the Chapel, if it isn't Mr. Jukes, though I says it. The Psalmist may ha' spoke of eating his meat with tears, as I remarked in the pulpit, but then they was his own tears, and he could ha' dried 'em up when he liked; but it's very different having your meals m'istened with other folks' tears, in season and out, as the saying is.'

Richard looked darkly at his father, but said nothing; if he had spoken it would have

been to say something neither of them would have forgotten. Happily at that moment Reuben came to tell his father he was wanted in the smithy, and he departed, leaving Richard and his mother alone in the kitchen.

'And how 's that lady, that dear lady at the hospital?' she asked when the door had closed behind her husband.

'Sister Johanna? She is very well, and sent her love to you, mother.'

'Did she now, to think o' that! Richard, when she brought me down home she stayed a couple of hours, and I never see anyone, leave alone being a female, so took wi' the smithy as she was. She fair surprised Reuben with her questions, and she asked all about you when you was a lad, and what you worked at, and wanted to see the place behind the big bellows where you used to bile your bones, and stuff birds and things.'

Richard looked and felt uncomfortable.

'And what do you think she asked me afore she left? Why, she asked me if I'd an

old photograph o' you when you was a lad, that I could spare her, and I had two, so I gave her one of 'em, and she put it safe in her purse and took it away with her. Richard, I'm but a' ignorant woman, and Sister Johanna is a lady, and full o' goodness and learning; but I've got eyes to see and a heart to feel, and I know someone as 'll love my son as he deserves to be loved, when I'm dead and gone,' and Mrs. Atherley beamed on him with eyes of motherly adoration.

'Why speak of when you are dead and gone, just as you have taken a fresh lease of life?' he replied, evading her real meaning. But in his heart of hearts something assured him that his mother had spoken the truth.

When the time came to say good-bye his father and his brother went with Richard across the enclosure, and stood talking with him a few minutes at the entrance to the High Street. Suddenly the bells of the old parish church broke into a noisy peal, rung in such haste it sounded as if the whole octave of

them were tumbling down the belfry stairs one after another, with a final crash when they all reached the ground together.

'They've had a fine day for it,' said Atherley, as the air vibrated with the metallic din.

'Fine day for what?' asked Richard.

'Why, didn't you see the market-place as you come along all full o' flags and decorations, though there's something stale about a second marriage for a woman, and a bunch o' dried herbs 'ud be about her mark. Mrs. Peveril's married to-day to a lord from London, '"Aselmere" 'is name is; she come down here and done it quiet at the little church on her late father's place, and the tradesfolk 'ere want her custom when she comes down to Featherstone 'All, which she don't do often, so they've took and decorated their shops and set the bells on making this ungodly noise,' said the blacksmith with a sour expression.

'Mrs. Peveril!' ejaculated Richard.

'Yes, she was Mr. Featherstone's only child.

Why, she was the little lady that come to the forge with her father the day as you forgot your duty and run away, her with the bright hair. She married a Colonel Peveril afore her father's death, and 'e left her a widder, and 'ere she's married again, a lord this time. Don't you remember 'er?'

'I think I remember everything that day, but I shall lose my train if I stay talking here. Good-bye, father; good-bye, Reuben, and take care of mother,' and Richard hurried to the station deafened by the clamour of Mrs. Peveril's wedding-bells, which did not seem to him louder than the beating of his own heart.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MUTUAL DISCOVERY

Room after room,
I hunt the house through
We inhabit together.
Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her,
Next time, herself!—Browning.

Richard's flying visit to the old home had accomplished all that he hoped and intended. It had delighted his mother, and confirmed him in the conviction that he could not have lived under the same roof with his father, so long as it was possible for him to make an honest livelihood anywhere else in the world. Reuben, doubtless, was more patient than his brother, that he still remained at home. But then he loved his trade, and his ambition aimed at nothing higher than becoming a skilled and successful blacksmith; and when

Atherley's temper was peculiarly acrid and aggressive, and made even his blood boil, the young man worked off his feelings at the anvil. As his hammer fell in ringing blows, and the sparks flashed from the glowing iron, in the stress of physical labour and the joy of exercising his craft, Reuben forgot his father's very existence, and when he saw him again, met him with a jovial surprise. Richard gave Johanna a vivid account of his visit to the scenes of his boyhood, and made no secret of the impression his father produced on his mind. He told her everything about it that he supposed might interest her, but he did not tell her that he had left the little town echoing to the clamour of Mrs. Peveril's wedding-bells. He would not mention her name at present, so much must needs follow when once the ice was broken on that subject; and having at last recovered his sanity and self-mastery, he endeavoured to preserve them both with the help of Johanna. In the midst of the absorbing work to which he devoted

his strengthened powers, his whole soul was set on proving whether the love once kindled between them might not even now be fanned into flame. He was eager to renew the old affectionate intimacy, but Johanna dared only enjoy it with trembling and self-restraint. If she were again deprived of it, it would be more than she could bear; and while pride shielded her from the pain she dreaded, Richard's heart had turned towards her as it did when he had repressed his love for her, and before Mrs. Peveril lured him away on a wild will-o'-the-wisp chase.

Johanna intuitively felt that Richard had lately passed through some crisis that had grievously wounded him. What it was she did not know and could not ask, for, in spite of their long friendship, Richard never gave his confidence except voluntarily, nor wanted sympathy until he asked for it. But, through whatever trouble he had been, he had emerged from it at his best, and she could only surmise that as Mrs. Peveril had not been to the hos-

pital for many months past, the change in him was in some way connected with her absence. It was possible that the link between them, whatever it might have been, was severed finally, and that for some cause or other he felt it to be a relief.

Johanna, like Richard, prescribed work as the sovereign remedy for ailments whether of heart or mind, and she threw herself with renewed energy into duties she had undertaken and persevered in for his sake. But now, were there no Richard in the world, she would have worked on at the hospital where love for him had first taken her, though higher guidance than his had kept her steadfast at her post.

It was the close of a more than usually busy day for Sister Johanna. The wards under her charge were full, a number of the cases were of exceptional interest and anxiety, and at noon she had been present when Mr. Dare operated on one of her patients. Such days were fast-days for Sister Johanna, for a

surgical operation, with all its accompanying details, took away her appetite entirely, and it was not till late in the afternoon that she refreshed herself with a cup of tea in her own room. After this she generally read for a quarter of an hour before returning to her duty in the ward; but to-day she felt incapable of any mental effort, and vaguely stretched out her hand towards the morning paper Richard had left on her table.

Sister Johanna was no politician, and made short work with a newspaper. She skipped the parliamentary reports, and wherever she caught sight of such words as prime minister, election, or franchise, she stifled a yawn and passed on to the next paragraph which she preferred at a venture. But it is hard if there should not be something to suit every taste in the varied entertainment provided by a daily paper, and at last she appeared to be interested in spite of herself, and ceased to turn and flutter its pages. An advertisement of a house to let in Queen

Square attracted her attention; strangely enough, the very house in which she had spent such happy years with her Uncle John, when Richard Dare had first come into her life. She had often waked in a morning homesick from dreams of the old house that made her long to see it again, and she resolved on her next holiday afternoon to go on pilgrimage thither, and, if she could obtain admittance, to look into every familiar nook and corner from garret to basement.

A couple of days later and Johanna was walking through the passage leading from Southampton Row. As she entered the Square, for a moment she saw it, free from glamour, with discerning and impartial eyes, as a place whose fortune was visibly on the wane. Hospitals and offices were encroaching on stately Queen Anne houses; the leisure and dignity of private life were overtaken and hustled aside by the hurry and publicity of business. Fashion had long ago spread her wings and flown westward, leaving behind

her solid and beautiful houses for those to dwell in who did not care to follow her capricious flight. Then the power of the past laid imperious hold upon Johanna, robbed her of the power of judging the present, and transformed the gloomy old-world square into enchanted ground, where every step called up a memory of her golden days.

She stood before the house with its blank windows and hideous projecting board with 'To Let' painted on it in large white letters, and she recalled its bright and cleanly aspect when she was mistress of the home domain. But, dark and lifeless as it looked, it was not entirely forsaken as a dwelling-place, for there were signs of habitation in the basement, and she mounted the steps that might never have been cleaned since she last set foot upon them, and rang the door bell loudly.

Johanna was kept waiting after she had rung almost as long as though there were a full staff of servants in the house, and she had time to count the few remaining leaves on the

smoke-blackened trees in the garden, and to notice the threatening sky overhead, before the door was opened by an aged and infirm specimen of the charwoman tribe. The old woman readily admitted her, and when she understood that the lady had not come to look over the house with a view to taking it, but merely because she had once lived there and wished to see it again, she let her wander about the empty rooms at her pleasure, excusing herself from attending her because of the difficulty she found in getting up and down stairs. Johanna was thankful to be left alone to wander ghost-like in her old haunts, and when the caretaker asked her if she should mind being left in the house while she went out to do an errand, she laughed at the idea. She would not be long away, but if she wished to leave before she returned she could shut the front door after her, and the old woman would let herself in with the key.

Johanna thought she could not feel eerie alone in a house every part of which was

thronged with living memories, and she enjoyed the prospect of a leisurely and uninterrupted exploration. The dining-room door stood open at the end of the hall, and she hesitated a moment whether she should first enter it or the library. Then, impelled by its associations of warmth and hospitality, she stepped into the dining-room, now changed to a scene of desolation, gaunt and chill in the dim autumn light. The bare walls, undraped windows, and carpetless floor looked unspeakably forlorn, and her footsteps sounded mournfully in the big room. Yet here beneath this ceiling, enclosed by these very walls, was the spot, though there was nothing by which she could now recognise it, where she had first met Richard Dare. She looked about her in bewilderment. There was not a thing by which she could be sure that this was indeed the room she had known so well, except the familiar outlook from the windows, of trees in the garden and houses on the opposite side of the Square.

Johanna spent a short time in what had been her uncle's library, memory calling up before her every detail of its furniture, the books upon the shelves, the very pattern of the carpet, and the dear old man seated in his arm-chair by the lamp. But here, too, she remembered Richard more vividly than her uncle; the whole house was fuller of associations with the living than the dead. The wide oak staircase even in its bareness still had a grand and hospitable appearance, and Johanna walked up its shallow steps to the first landing, where she sat on the window-seat and looked down on the melancholy strip of garden at the back. There was no change there. It was the same dull, sooty, characteristic London garden as ever. The blackened walls were covered with the rusty foliage of virginia creeper, and the plane-tree in the middle stood bare, its cast summer clothing lying in a russet ring of leaves at its foot.

Johanna turned from the window with a

sigh, and mounting the stairs she passed the half-open door of the drawing-room on her way to her old bedroom on the floor above, and entered it, feeling like a disembodied spirit returning to the scenes of its former life. Was it possible that this dismal-looking room had once been so dear to her, so beautiful in her eyes, her sanctuary from the outer world? There was no association here but with her former self, the young girl who had slept and dreamed here, and whose day-dreams had been wild as any vision of the night. She lingered for a little while, then turned and closed the door behind her, softly as though it were the chamber of death, and crossing the landing entered her uncle's room.

Johanna looked about her at the four walls, and her inner vision saw everything as it had been so vividly, she ceased to be aware that she stood in a stripped and dismantled room. Her heart swelled at the recollection of her Uncle John's goodness to

her. She saw him once more in his bed as he had been after his accident, but still more clearly she saw young Richard Dare sitting beside him, and the years that had passed since they first met seemed as nothing. The house was haunted, and she began to repent her temerity in once more crossing its threshold.

Slowly Johanna descended the wide staircase to the drawing-room, her heart beating quickly to the echo of her footfall. The silence was oppressive, and a feeling came upon her as though it might be suddenly broken by her uncle's voice calling her from the library below. Is there anything so melancholy, except an open grave, as a dismantled and forsaken house to one who has known it as a sheltering home and centre of warm human life and interest? Johanna did not often shed tears, but when she stood in the great empty drawing-room, the scene of the romance of her youth, she wept silently. Here had been her piano, and here Richard

had sat and listened while these walls echoed to her young voice. There had stood the table where she had given him his German lessons, and here they had sat together on the night she told him she must go to Italy with her uncle. It was Richard, Richard everywhere.

Johanna looked out into the fading light from the very window where they had so often stood and watched the stars before they said good-night. Out of doors all was as gloomy as within; the threatening sky was now a performing sky, and heavy rain was falling that would keep her a prisoner till it abated. Suddenly she started back from the window, at a sight astonishing her far more than if in her astronomical days an unpremeditated comet had swept across the sky. It was Richard Dare whom she had just seen on the doorstep; he had already entered the house and his quick firm step resounded in the hall.

For a moment it seemed to Johanna that

the great empty room rushed round with her, and she turned a pale face towards the door. She heard Richard moving about in the room below, then he mounted the stairs two steps at a time and came straight into the empty drawing-room, flinging the door wide open as he entered. Johanna was prepared to see him, but her unexpected appearance startled him extremely, while it delighted him, and he exclaimed, 'Good Heavens, Johanna, what brings you here?'

'The very question I was asking you, when I saw you only a moment ago, dropped on the doorstep from the clouds,' she said, astonished at Richard's agitation of manner, which was beyond that of mere surprise.

'I can easily explain what brings me here. I had to attend a consultation a few doors below, and seeing the notice that the house was to let, I thought I would have a look at the old place again, especially as the front door stood temptingly open and I had nothing to do but enter. And I find you here, Johanna—I find

you here,' and he took her hands in his. 'I cannot call even a momentary caprice accidental that led to this.'

'And I came because I saw in the paper that the house was to let, and I could not lose the chance of seeing my old home again, or rather the skeleton of it, for all its life is gone,' and Richard saw the traces of tears still lingering on her cheeks, and he longed to kiss them away.

He looked round the gaunt, unfurnished room, that echoed to the lightest sound, and then turned with relief to the sweet face before him.

'This is not an empty or dreary spot to me, for I have found here all that I want in the world! I have found you, Johanna, the magnet that used to draw me to this house. Tell me that I make a part of your memories of the old home?' and he held her hand closely between his.

Johanna changed colour, but she did not withdraw her hand, and unbidden thoughts of

Mrs. Peveril entered her mind. If Richard still cared for Mrs. Peveril as she believed he had done, then he was only sentimentalising about their early friendship, and he must do it alone if he wished. She would not be led into it by him.

'You are bound up with all my memories in this house: one does not readily forget one's only pupil: I have taught German to no one but you, Richard,' and she smiled as she spoke.

'In those days, Johanna, you, and of course your uncle, were my only friends, the only people I knew! In all wide London this was the only house where I was welcome.'

'That must have ceased to be the case for many a year. You may know every one now if you like; you almost need protecting from the multitude of your friends. But there is one friend of yours I have not seen for a long time. Mrs. Peveril has not been to the hospital for the last six months or more;' and Johanna, alarmed at her own boldness, looked up expecting to see some change of expres-

sion in Richard when he heard her name. But he met her timid, inquiring glance steadily.

'Dear Johanna, don't you understand enough of the erratic ways of fine ladies by this time, to know that they keep to nothing long? Mrs. Peveril took up with hospital visiting in a lucid interval between the hobby she was then weary of riding and the discovery of its successor that would carry her in an opposite direction. But she has done something quite different from hospital visiting lately: can you guess what it is?' and Richard enjoyed the feeling he detected beneath Johanna's affected indifference.

'I cannot guess, but I am sure it must be something original, or she would not do it.'

'So far from that being the case, she has done a thoroughly commonplace thing; there was not even novelty to recommend it to her. Mrs. Peveril was married for the second time the day I went home to see my mother.'

'Richard!' and Johanna clasped her

hands and broke into a gleeful laugh, that said as plainly as words could have spoken, it was the best news she had ever heard. 'Then I was mistaken after all! I thought you were engaged to her, and I didn't wonder; it seemed so natural that you should love such an attractive and beautiful woman. But I must have made a great mistake—I shall beware how I trust my instinct again!'

Richard would have given much to assure her that her instinct had been at fault, but it was his habit to speak truth as fearlessly to women as to men, and drawing her nearer to him he said:

'Your intuition was perfectly right, Johanna. I did love Mrs. Peveril, and I thought that she loved me, and there was my mistake. It is all over now, the pain and degradation of it. It is a long story, and if you care to hear it, some day I will tell it to you from beginning to end. But I cannot be angry with her, or with any circumstances

that have given me back my freedom, and my free heart turned to you, darling Johanna, where it would always have rested if I had not been a vain fool. Can you forgive me the pain I have caused you?' and he drew her close to his side.

'Oh, Richard! I forget it all; it is gone like a dream. Don't speak harshly of yourself, for I have nothing to forgive,' she said in happy, tremulous tones.

'Then take me for what I am, Johanna; a man shaped by many influences besides yours, developed in ways neither of us could have foreseen, wholly different from your girlish conception of me, but such as I am, soundly and truly your own, for I love you—love you—love you!' and he folded Johanna in his arms and held her to his heart.

THE END

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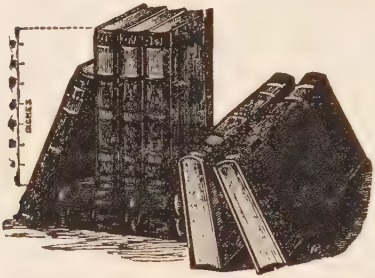

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